

# 'Don't Mess with Texas': Baptist Identity in the Midst of Controversy

**Lon Graham**

Lon Graham (PhD, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam) is the pastor of The Woods Baptist Church in Tyler, Texas.

panicbird@yahoo.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3079-908X>

## **Abstract:**

In the 1980s, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) found itself embroiled in a controversy between moderates and inerrantists. It was a struggle for control of the convention, all its infrastructure, and the right to set the course for Southern Baptists, and those affiliated with them, around the world. While the inerrantists eventually won the war on the national stage, things went differently in the Texas Baptist state convention, known as the Baptist General Convention of Texas. This article examines what happened in the Texas Baptist controversy of the 1980s and 1990s and shows how a unique Texas Baptist identity enabled the moderates to do in Texas what could not be done in the national convention: hold their ground and prevent the inerrantists from achieving victory.

## **Keywords:**

Texas; moderates; Baptist identity; controversy

## **Introduction**

A controversy erupted in the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) in 1979 and continued throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s. It was a struggle for control of the convention, all its infrastructure, and the right to set the course for Southern Baptists, and those affiliated with them, around the world. The two belligerents in the conflict were the moderates and the inerrantists.<sup>1</sup> During the initial stages of the

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<sup>1</sup> This nomenclature needs elaboration, as each side was known by various names. The moderates often called themselves 'mainstream' or 'traditional' Baptists, while their opponents labelled them as 'liberals', which was meant as an offensive epithet. 'Inerrantists' were so called because of their belief in and emphasis upon the inerrancy of Scripture. Moderates most often referred to them with the pejorative 'fundamentalist'. Inerrantists preferred the name 'conservative' for themselves. This article will not use that name for them, however, as in Texas, the very name 'conservative' was one over which the two sides fought. This article will,

controversy, the focus was on the SBC as a national body, not so much on the smaller state conventions or local associations.<sup>2</sup> However, as it became obvious that the inerrantists were going to win nationally, the state conventions began to be drawn into the fray. In 1988, Paul Pressler, one of the main leaders of the inerrantists, wrote in an open letter to his supporters that 'conservatives have made some real gains' in several states.<sup>3</sup> In that same letter, Pressler disclosed that there was a major roadblock in the way of an inerrantist sweep in state conventions: Texas.

The Baptist state convention in Texas, known as the Baptist General Convention of Texas (BGCT) counts over 5000 churches among its constituent members and has a budget in excess of \$34 million. There are twelve affiliated colleges and academies, a newspaper, five medical centres, and many other associated ministries. It is a sprawling, resource-rich organisation. All of this combined to make the Texas Baptist convention an unsurprising place of conflict in a contentious moment in Southern Baptist history. This paper will examine what happened in the Texas Baptist controversy of the 1980s and 1990s and show how a unique Texas Baptist identity enabled the moderates to do in Texas what could not be done in the national convention: hold their ground and prevent the inerrantists from achieving victory in the BGCT.

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therefore, refer to the opponents of the moderates as 'inerrantists'. This term is not without its drawbacks, the most notable of which is the fact that some of those who fought for the moderate side held to the inerrancy of Scripture, but it is relatively free from the negative connotations that would be associated with the word 'fundamentalist'.

<sup>2</sup>The name 'Southern Baptist Convention' gives the impression that there is one entity to which all Southern Baptists belong, which is not the case. The Southern Baptist Convention is the national organisation. However, many states have their own convention of churches, and those states that do not are often part of a regional convention. For example, churches from Washington, Oregon, and Idaho have combined to organise the Northwest Baptist Convention. These state and regional conventions are not subsidiaries of the national convention but are each autonomous. While they may partner with the national convention, it is a voluntary partnership, and a church may partner with a state convention but not the national convention. There are also local associations of churches, which are also autonomous. Thus, to win the national organisation does not necessarily mean winning any of the state conventions or local associations. Those battles would have to be fought separately.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Pressler, 'Open Letter', 8 January 1988, author's personal collection.

## Summary of the Southern Baptist Controversy

The causes and characters of the controversy have been covered in several books;<sup>4</sup> however, a brief rehearsal of the key players and events will be helpful. The controversy itself began as a ten-year plan on the part of inerrantists to gain positions of power within the SBC so that they might implement their preferred policies, procedures, and vision within the convention. The formulation of the plan is typically attributed to two men from Texas, Paige Patterson, who was, at the time, president of the Criswell Center for Biblical Studies (now Criswell College) in Dallas, Texas and Paul Pressler, a judge in Houston, Texas. Patterson summarised their plan as follows:

First, we located all the conservatives [e.g. inerrantists] we could. Second, we needed to counteract the one-sided information put out by the state Baptist newspapers. We started our own, the *Southern Baptist Advocate*. Third, we agreed to elect a solid conservative president. His appointive powers determine who goes on the boards and agencies.<sup>5</sup>

For those unfamiliar with SBC polity, though the convention is technically led by individual Baptists, called messengers, boards and agencies wield significant authority in determining the course of the denomination.

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<sup>4</sup> Accounts of the conflict from the inerrantist side include: James Hefley, *The Truth in Crisis*, 6 vols (Hannibal, MO: Hannibal Books, 1986–1991); Paige Patterson, *Anatomy of a Reformation*, 2nd edn (Fort Worth, TX: Seminary Hill Press, 2004); Paul Pressler, *A Hill on Which to Die: One Southern Baptist's Journey* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1998); Jerry Sutton, *The Baptist Reformation: The Conservative Resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2000). Moderate accounts include: Nancy Ammerman, *Baptist Battles: Social Change and Religion Conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990); Grady Cothen, *What Happened to the Southern Baptist Convention? A Memoir of the Controversy*, 2nd edn (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 1993); Barry Hankins, *Uneasy in Babylon: Southern Baptist Conservatives and American Culture* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2003); Bill Leonard, *God's Last and Only Hope: The Fragmentation of the Southern Baptist Convention* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990); Cecil Sherman, *By My Own Reckoning* (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 2008); Walter Shurden, ed., *The Struggle for the Soul of the SBC: Moderate Responses to the Fundamentalist Movement* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1994); Walter Shurden and Randy Shepley, eds, *Going for the Jugular: A Documentary History of the SBC Holy War* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Sidney Blumenthal, 'The Righteous Empire', *The New Republic*, 191, no. 16 (October 1984), 18–24 (p. 19).

The short version of SBC history since 1979 is that the inerrantists won. That year they elected as president of the convention, Adrian Rogers, a pastor from Memphis and reliable inerrantist, and the SBC has never again had a non-inerrantist-aligned president. The moderates launched counter-campaigns in an attempt to get one of their own elected to the presidency, but they repeatedly failed. By the end of 1990, most moderates realised that they had lost.<sup>6</sup> Many left for the newly-formed Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, while others moved to the mainline American Baptist Churches or other Baptist and non-denominational groups.

### Texas Baptist Identity

As indicated by the letter from Pressler mentioned in the introduction above, it was no later than 1988 that attention began to shift to the state conventions. If the national controversy can be understood either as a surprise resurgence or takeover, the controversy in Texas should be understood as a deliberate defensive manoeuvre, with the moderates being able to defend their positions of power more successfully than they were able to do so on the national scene. They were able to accomplish this by using particular aspects of Texas Baptist identity to prevent the inerrantist talking points and tactics from taking root in Texas soil.

Walter Shurden popularised the concept of regional Baptist identities when he traced what he understood as the four traditions that constituted what he called 'the Southern Baptist synthesis'.<sup>7</sup> These traditions are the Charleston tradition, the Sandy Creek tradition, the Georgia tradition, and the Tennessee tradition. Each tradition made a unique contribution to the Southern Baptist heritage: Charleston

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<sup>6</sup> That year, Daniel Vestal, the moderate candidate, faced off against Morris Chapman, the inerrantist candidate. The moderates hoped that Vestal would be able to best Chapman and give hope that the moderate voice would still be heard. Chapman's resounding victory signalled to the moderates that they had finally lost the battle for the SBC.

<sup>7</sup> Walter B. Shurden, 'The Southern Baptist Synthesis: Is It Cracking?' Carver-Barnes Lectures, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1980–81, p. 5. These lectures were published in Walter B. Shurden, 'The Southern Baptist Synthesis: Is It Cracking?', *Baptist History and Heritage*, 16, no. 2 (April 1981), 2–11. The original lectures will be cited henceforth.

brought order, Sandy Creek taught Southern Baptists ardour, Georgia championed denominational cooperation, and Tennessee gave Southern Baptists a sense of honour.<sup>8</sup>

The recognition of a unique Texas Baptist identity in addition to Shurden's four traditions was given shape and a definition by Leon McBeth.<sup>9</sup> McBeth describes the Texas tradition as being distinguished by 'intense conservatism, fervent evangelism, and a spirit of independence'.<sup>10</sup> These are, of course, not the only aspects, nor should it be understood to say that they are not present in other Baptists; rather, it is to contend, with McBeth, that 'these seem to assume a prominence and intensity' among Texas Baptists that makes them worthy of emphasis.<sup>11</sup>

More to the point, it is these three aspects of Texas Baptist identity that enabled the moderates in the state to keep the inerrantists from what would have looked like a sure victory in a state where the deck would seem to have been stacked well in favour of inerrantists. These apparent odds for victory included the fact that the two chief architects of the inerrantist takeover were Texans who were still based in Texas. One of the other main leaders of the inerrantists, W. A. Criswell, was a well-known pastor of a large church in Dallas, Texas.

<sup>8</sup> Shurden, 'Southern Baptist Synthesis', pp. 5–8.

<sup>9</sup> Grady Cothen accepted McBeth's Texas tradition as a suitable addition to Shurden's previous four (Grady Cothen, *Whatever Happened to the Southern Baptist Convention? A Memoir of the Controversy* (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 1993), pp. 50–51). McBeth was not the first to suggest a fifth tradition informing Southern Baptists. McBeth himself says that Albert McClellan first suggested it (Harry Leon McBeth, 'The Texas Tradition: A Study in Baptist Regionalism (Part 1)', *Baptist History and Heritage*, 26, no. 1 (January 1991), 37–47 (p. 38)). Robert D. Dale and John Loftis both made similar proposals. See Robert D. Dale, 'An Identity Crisis: Southern Baptists Search for Heroic Leaders', *Faith and Mission*, 1, no. 2 (Spring 1984), 36–47 (p. 40); and John Franklin Loftis, 'Factors in Southern Baptist Identity as Reflected by Ministerial Role Models, 1750–1925', (doctoral dissertation, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1987), p. 214.

<sup>10</sup> Harry Leon McBeth, 'The Texas Tradition: A Study in Baptist Regionalism (Part 2)', *Baptist History and Heritage*, 26, no. 1 (January 1991), 48–57 (p. 48). McBeth anchors the Texas tradition in Texas Baptist history, heroes, and institutions. He singles out Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary as the Texas tradition's 'major institutional expression' and the *Baptist Standard* as 'a major force both in creating and sustaining that tradition'. He cites 'B. H. Carroll as the primary architect of the new tradition, L. R. Scarborough as its most fervent evangelist, and George W. Truett as its primary pastoral role model' (McBeth, 'Texas Tradition (Part 1)', p. 38).

<sup>11</sup> McBeth, 'Texas Tradition (Part 2)', p. 48.

The 1979 SBC meeting that elected the first inerrantist president Adrian Rogers was held in Houston, Texas; another pivotal meeting, in 1988, at which the SBC passed the infamous 'Priesthood of the Believer' resolution,<sup>12</sup> was held in San Antonio, Texas. Finally, one of the features of McBeth's Texas tradition is 'intense conservatism'. That would appear to give the inerrantists, who so often claimed the mantle of true conservatism, a significant built-in advantage. However, the inerrantists would lose the battle for the BGCT, and lose so badly that they left the convention to form their own, the Southern Baptists of Texas Convention (SBTC).<sup>13</sup>

McBeth's aspects of the Texas tradition will now be used as a framework for understanding the moderate victory.

### **Texas Baptist Identity in Conflict: Intense Conservatism**

The intense conservatism that appeared to give the inerrantists an advantage actually turned into a strength for the moderates.<sup>14</sup> On the national stage, the inerrantists were successful in vindicating the label 'conservative' as synonymous with 'biblical'. Anything that was deemed not conservative, or not sufficiently conservative was, by their

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<sup>12</sup> The resolution proved controversial among the moderates, as they claimed that it served to exalt the authority of the pastor, an inerrantist emphasis, at the expense of the doctrine of the priesthood of the believer, a moderate emphasis. The day after the resolution passed, W. Randall Lolley, former president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, led a group of moderate messengers out of the convention centre and to the Alamo, where they wrote 'heresy' on their ballots and proceeded to tear them up (Toby Druin, 'Fundamental-Conservatives Claim 10<sup>th</sup> Win', *Baptist Standard*, 22 June 1988, p. 3).

<sup>13</sup> The new convention had roots in two inerrantist advocacy organisations: the Southern Baptists of Texas and Baptists with a Mission, which, even before their merger, worked together to 'coordinate things that we want to do so that we are all singing from the same sheet of music and heading in the same direction' (Ted Tedder and Miles Seaborn, 'Open Letter to Pastors', 30 June 1995, author's personal collection). In 2019, the SBTC counted over 2700 churches as affiliates of its organisation, though many of those are 'dually-aligned' with both the SBTC and the BGCT.

<sup>14</sup> Though written for a different context (i.e. a study of the relationship of Texas Baptists to the religious right), Blake Ellis expressed a similar idea: 'To argue against such a move, Texas Baptists employed the same conservative theology as the national leadership but emphasized different aspects of it.' (Blake A. Ellis, 'An Alternative Politics: Texas Baptists and the Rise of the Christian Right, 1975-1985', *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, 112, no. 4 (April 2009), 361-386 (pp. 363-64).

definition, not biblical. Opponents were painted as ‘liberal’ (i.e. non-conservative) as a way to silence them.

Texas Baptists, however, almost all believed that they were conservative, such that it proved exceedingly difficult to portray anyone as non-conservative. Jerold McBride, president of the BGCT from 1994 to 1996 and the favoured candidate of the moderate advocacy group Texas Baptists Committed (TBC), said, upon his election, ‘I don’t ever want to be considered anything other than a theological conservative.’<sup>15</sup> In the 1980s and 1990s, the *Baptist Standard* had a circulation in the hundreds of thousands and so exercised tremendous influence among Texas Baptists. That publication refused to cede the label ‘conservative’ to the inerrantists, referring not to conservatives/moderates or fundamentalists/moderates, but to ‘fundamental-conservative’ and ‘moderate-conservative’. Referring to the 1988 SBC meeting in San Antonio, Presnall H. Wood, the editor of the *Baptist Standard*, summed up the issue: ‘The convention was deeply and almost equally divided between two brands of conservatives — the fundamental-conservatives and the moderate-conservatives.’<sup>16</sup>

Charles Wade, leading Texas moderate and pastor of the First Baptist Church in Arlington, Texas, wrote that ‘they have said that we don’t believe the Bible, but we do. They have said we are liberals! But we are the true conservatives!’<sup>17</sup> This was echoed by Maston Courtney, a layman who was involved in the moderate cause, who said, ‘We have been blessed to be – and remain – old-time Southern Baptists – mainstream theologically conservative Baptists.’<sup>18</sup> Courtney went on to make a distinction between his brand of mainstream conservatism and

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<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Ken Camp, ‘Texas Baptists Reject Defunding of Baylor; Elect McBride President’, *Baptist Press*, 93, no. 181 (26 October 1993), p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> Presnall H. Wood, ‘San Antonio SBC Shows Need of Revival’, *Baptist Standard*, 22 June 1988, p. 6. In the same issue, Toby Druin, associate editor for the paper, offered his own summary of the 1988 meeting: ‘True to their goal, fundamental-conservatives rolled to their 10<sup>th</sup> consecutive victory in the Southern Baptist Convention sweepstakes’ (Toby Druin, ‘Fundamental-Conservatives Claim 10<sup>th</sup> Win’, *Baptist Standard*, 22 June 1988, p. 3).

<sup>17</sup> Charles Wade, ‘Don’t Mess with Texas!’ Undated, but written after the release of the ‘Peace Report’ in 1987, author’s personal collection.

<sup>18</sup> Maston Courtney, ‘Who We Are and Why We Are Here’, Southwest Park Baptist Church, Abilene, Texas, 20 November 1986, John F. Baugh Papers, The Texas Collection, Baylor University. Formatting in original.

that of his opponents: 'As conservative mainstream Texas Baptists we are in serious disagreement with our fundamentalist brothers.'<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps the clearest moderate claim on the name conservative came from Charlie McLaughlin writing in the Texas Baptists Committed newsletter: 'There is a word that describes the core values of Texas Baptists Committed. The term is "Conservative." It has been hijacked and I want it back. For years the fundamentalists have claimed the term "conservative" for themselves.'<sup>20</sup> Then McLaughlin referred to a story from the *Dallas Morning News*, which quoted inerrantist leader Rick Scarborough, who said, 'Conservatives can't win here.' The story went on to quote the rebuttal of moderate David Currie: 'They're not conservatives. They're fundamentalists. The conservatives win here every year.'<sup>21</sup>

Each of these statements are indicative of the way that moderates claimed the 'conservative' label for themselves. On the national stage, the inerrantists were able to define and promote conservatism in such a way as to silence opponents. In Texas, however, the moderates turned that to their advantage, using the established identity of Texas Baptists as 'intense conservatives' to rob the inerrantists of what had been a useful rhetorical tool.

## **Texas Baptist Identity in Conflict: The Spirit of Independence**

The independence of Texans goes back into its history as a part of Mexico, from which they seceded in 1836, producing their own 'Declaration of Independence', modelled on the earlier 'Declaration' made by the United States. The spirit of independence shared by Texas Baptists made it easy for the moderates to portray the inerrantists as an outside force bent on taking over Texas Baptist institutions and dictating to Texas Baptists how to run their convention.

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<sup>19</sup> Courtney, 'Who We Are and Why We Are Here'.

<sup>20</sup> Charlie McLaughlin, 'True Conservatives', *Texas Baptists Committed*, February 1997, p. 4.

<sup>21</sup> McLaughlin, 'True Conservatives', p. 4. The Scarborough quote is taken from Christine Wicker, 'Moderate Retains Control of Texas Baptist Group', *Dallas Morning News*, 12 November 1996, p. 18A.



Independence and religion are inextricably tied together in the Texan mindset, as evidenced in the Texas ‘Declaration of Independence’. In making their case for declaring themselves a ‘free, Sovereign, and independent republic’,<sup>22</sup> the Texans list the grievances they had with the Mexican government which led them to take such drastic steps. One of the grievances both reveals and would come to shape Texas religious life. It states, ‘[The Mexican government] denies us the right of worshipping the Almighty according to the dictates of our own conscience, by the support of a national religion, calculated to promote the temporal interest of its human functionaries, rather than the glory of the true and living God.’<sup>23</sup> In a Baptist vein, the Texans appeal to the liberty of the conscience, saying, in essence, that it had been violated by the Mexican government. The sacred nature of the conscience, and a deep unwillingness to see it violated, would come to mark the identity of both Texans in general and Texas Baptists in particular, thus making way for McBeth’s ‘spirit of independence’ and another prong in the moderates’ defence against the inerrantists.

The moderates appealed to the Texas Baptists’ spirit of independence in at least two ways. First, they used it to explain their denominational polity. In the 1990s, the BGCT published a series of articles under the heading ‘Because You Asked...’. In one of the articles, they dealt with the issue of the relationship of the BGCT to other Baptist bodies. Several questions were put forward and answered, and the answers given state plainly the independent conviction of the Texas Baptists. For example, in answer to the question, ‘Is each Baptist entity autonomous and free from the control of any other?’ they write, ‘Absolutely. The local church is the basic unit of Baptist life, and each church is autonomous. That means self governing. Only Christ is Lord of the church. No other Baptist body has the right to dictate to a church what to believe or how to function.’ In answer to the question, ‘Does the model of county, state and federal government apply to Baptist organizational life?’ they answer, unequivocally, ‘No, not at all. The Baptist General Convention of Texas and the SBC are autonomous,

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<sup>22</sup> ‘The Texas Declaration of Independence’, in *The U.S.-Mexican War: A Binational Reader*, ed. by Christopher Conway (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2010), pp. 16–19 (p. 19).

<sup>23</sup> ‘The Texas Declaration of Independence’, p. 18.

independent Baptist bodies. Neither has authority over the other [...] It is also incorrect to speak of levels of Baptist organized life. Beyond the local church, they are all on the same level, that is equal and independent.' Finally, in answer to the question, 'What is the relationship of Baptist bodies to each other then?' they write, 'Two words sum up what it ought to be: voluntary cooperation.'<sup>24</sup>

Jerold McBride, then-president of the BGCT, put the matter more bluntly and memorably during a news conference, saying, 'Texas Baptists are not a farm team of the Southern Baptist Convention. The SBC doesn't make Texas Baptists possible. Texas Baptists make the SBC possible.'<sup>25</sup> Whether in a formal way through BGCT press releases or in more informal ways coming from denominational leaders, the moderates used the independence of Texas Baptists in order to explain the inner workings of denominational polity.

Whereas the first use of independence in their rhetoric had to do with who Texas Baptists were, and was, thus, more positive in nature, their second use of independence had to do with what their opponents might do if left unchecked. It was, therefore, more negative in tone and stoked the fear that Texas Baptists had of outside interference.

An issue of the *Baptist Standard*, written prior to the 1980 SBC meeting, carried repeated warnings of an outside group intent on taking control. Referring to the political manoeuvring of the previous year, editor Presnall Wood writes that 'the same group that was meeting before the convention last year is still having meetings and possibly plans to do so for the next 10 years'.<sup>26</sup> Inerrantist leaders had, by that time, become open about their plans, and Wood wanted Texas Baptists

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<sup>24</sup> Baptist General Convention of Texas: Office of Communication, 'Because You Asked...What is the relationship of the Baptist General Convention of Texas to other Baptist bodies?' Press Release, author's personal collection.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Ken Camp, 'Texas Baptists Reject Defunding of Baylor; Elect McBride President', *Baptist Press*, 93, no. 181 (26 October 1993), p. 3. Charles Wade made a similar comment after his election as President of the BGCT in 1997: 'We have never been a franchise for the SBC' (quoted in Christine Wicker, 'Moderate Retains Control of Texas Baptist Group', *Dallas Morning News*, 12 November 1996, p. 18A).

<sup>26</sup> Presnall H. Wood, 'Concerns about 'Concerned' Organization', *Baptist Standard*, 23 April 1980, p. 6.

to know what they were and how it might impact the convention as a whole, writing,

They plan to help elect the president of the Southern Baptist Convention for at least four consecutive years, maybe 10, and thus control appointment of the committee on committees. That committee could in turn appoint persons of like mind, and possibly control the boards and agencies of the Southern Baptist Convention in a 10 year period [...] It smacks of a take-over.<sup>27</sup>

Charles Wade, in 1987, took the same rhetoric and applied it to the Texans specifically, writing, ‘Paige Patterson has said, “We must now move beyond the SBC to change the direction of the Texas Baptist Convention.” And I say, “Paige, don’t mess with Texas”’.<sup>28</sup> Even though Patterson himself was a Texan, and the son of a former executive secretary of the BGCT, Wade was able to portray him as an outsider intent on coming into Texas to take over the BGCT. To independent-minded Texans, there was an almost reflexive reaction against ideas of a takeover.

In a letter to William Pinson, then the executive director of the BGCT, John Baugh stated what he felt to be the specific threats to Texas Baptist independence posed by the inerrantists. The threats Baugh outlined are as numerous as they are far-reaching, and they show how much Texas Baptists feared the violation of their independence:

I believe that Fundamentalism’s principal designs to take over state conventions, particularly the BGCT, are to obtain: assurance of a continuous major flow of money to Nashville, control of Evangelism Conference platforms in order to attempt re-establishment of unmerited credibility, seizure of the *Baptist Standard*, again to rebuild failed credibility, control of state convention colleges and university, seizure of the Baptist Foundation of Texas, creation of bloc voting in secular politics and ultimately, the absolute arbitrary control of pension monies to be paid to retired pastors and other denominational employees.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Charles Wade, ‘Don’t Mess with Texas!’ ‘Don’t Mess with Texas’ comes from an anti-littering advertising campaign in the 1980s. Also, it is not certain when or where Patterson said this, though it is consistent with things he is known to have said. See Paige Patterson, ‘Conversations with Evangelicals’, Interview, *Texas Baptist*, 2, no. 4 (July 1995), p. 4.

<sup>29</sup> John F. Baugh, ‘Letter to William M. Pinson’, 19 October 1993, John F. Baugh Papers, The Texas Collection, Baylor University. Copied into the letter were Milton Cunningham, Director of Denominational Affairs for Baylor University; Richard Maples, pastor of the First Baptist

Whether Baugh was correct is immaterial. His letter reveals the fears that Texas Baptists had of inerrantists taking control of the convention.

The moderates received a considerable boost for their rhetoric invoking independence when, in 1994, the trustees of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary fired Russell Dilday as president. It would be difficult to overstate how controversial this was in the state of Texas. The connection between Texas Baptists and Southwestern runs deep. Even though Southwestern had long been under the control of the national convention and not the BGCT, many Texas Baptists understood the school as their seminary. When a group of perceived outsiders imposed their will on the seminary, against the wishes of many, if not most, Texas Baptists, the reaction was swift and overwhelmingly negative, with many moderates believing that the firing of Dilday vindicated their warnings and rhetoric.

John Baugh wrote in a letter to Brian Harbour, a one-time chairman of the Executive Board of the BGCT, 'The March 9 firing of Dr. Russell Dilday was viewed as high drama throughout the nation. Dr. Dilday's commitment to conservative theology was unquestioned [...] Some of the Fundamentalist-appointed trustees lied to Dr. Dilday [...] lied about Dr. Dilday [...] misused Dr. Dilday in ways abhorrent to all Christians.'<sup>30</sup> Baugh then asks, ominously, 'Is the Fundamentalist phalanx to be allowed use of its armor to destroy the BGCT? Will the pendulum be melted down to form stronger and longer lances? Will [the inerrantists] subject Texas Baptists to unopposed Fundamentalist "purification"?'<sup>31</sup> Texas Baptists Committed warned,

Texas has more than 5,500 churches and missions. Most of the pastors are trained by Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. Over the next twenty years, as those students are trained by a fundamentalist faculty, which

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Church in Bryan, Texas, and a key moderate leader; Dewey Presley, an influential layman; Levi Price, chair of the Executive Board of the BGCT; James Semple, director of the State Missions Commission of the BGCT; and Bailey Stone, director of the Evangelism Division of the BGCT. Baugh was a wealthy and passionate businessman who fought for the moderate side and whose influence in the Baptist world has not been fully appreciated.

<sup>30</sup> John F. Baugh, 'Letter to Brian L. Harbour', 22 February 1995, John F. Baugh Papers, The Texas Collection, Baylor University.

<sup>31</sup> John F. Baugh, 'Letter to Brian L. Harbour', 22 February 1995.

Southwestern will become, and then go to Texas churches, our state could turn fundamentalist. This must not happen.<sup>32</sup>

TBC went on to urge Texas Baptists to

make a strong commitment to never allow a fundamentalist takeover of the Baptist General Convention of Texas. Texas Baptists, if they were a denomination by themselves would be the fourth largest denomination in the United States. The budget of the BGCT and its related institutions (hospitals, universities, children's homes, etc.) is larger than the budget of the SBC and its related institutions. God has blessed Texas Baptists and we must be good stewards of all he has given Texas Baptists. Texas Baptists stood and kept [the fundamentalist] J. Frank Norris from destroying our state convention once, and we must, with integrity under the grace of God, stand against his spiritual children today. WE MUST NEVER ALLOW THIS STATE CONVENTION TO TURN FROM OUR BAPTIST HERITAGE!<sup>33</sup>

The independence of Texas Baptists and the moderate's ability to use the conflict to explain independent denominational polity as well as portray the inerrantists as invaders combined to severely weaken the inerrantist chances at victory in the BGCT.

### **Texas Baptist Identity in Conflict: Fervent Evangelism**

The fervent evangelism of Texas Baptists served both as the glue which held the convention together during the controversy as well as a reason for the moderates to urge Texas Baptists to ignore or dismiss the

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<sup>32</sup> Anon., 'Controlling Our Destiny as Texas Baptists', *Texas Baptists Committed*, March 1994, p. 10.

<sup>33</sup> Anon., 'Ways to Respond to Russell Dilday's Firing', *Texas Baptists Committed*, March 1994, p. 3. Capitals in copy. J. Frank Norris was an early-twentieth-century preacher who exercised considerable influence among Texas Baptists, both those within the BGCT and those who were more independent-minded. In the 1920s, he began to offer stinging criticisms of Baylor University, a crown jewel of Texas Baptist higher education, and Southern Baptist initiatives (e.g. the Seventy-Five Million Campaign), becoming a thorn in the side of the BGCT. The memory of Norris lived long in the minds of Texas Baptists, and tying inerrantists to Norris was a favourite tactic of the moderates, from the grassroots level all the way to the leadership. In 1984, after the SBC meeting in Kansas City, Missouri, a letter to the editor invoked Norris, saying, 'The ghost of J. Frank Norris walked Bartle Hall in Kansas City, June 12-14, chuckling to himself, "We've won it all"' (D. R. Phillips, 'Letter to the Editor', *Baptist Standard*, 27 June 1984, p. 2). Texas Baptists Committed spoke of their inerrantist opponents as 'the spiritual children of J. Frank Norris' (Anon., 'L. R. Scarborough: He Set Our Example', *Texas Baptists Committed*, March 1994, p. 11).

inerrantist agenda, as it distracted them from their mission to get the gospel to all people. This mission-based rejection of the inerrantist programme appeared early. In 1980, the *Baptist Standard* ran an opinion piece by C. E. Colton called 'Our Inerrancy Syndrome', in which Colton pleaded for Texans to be less passionate about defending the Bible and more passionate about proclaiming it: 'It seems to me that God would be more pleased with us if we spent more time proclaiming the divinely inspired word of God in its message to a lost, dying world and less time trying to defend it. The Bible does not need defending; it needs proclaiming.'<sup>34</sup>

The commitment to missions and evangelism, like their independence, has deep roots in Texas history and institutions. Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas was organised as a training centre for 'soul winners'. The second president of Southwestern, L. R. Scarborough, described the heart of the seminary, 'If the Southwestern Seminary has any phase of its work which is unique, if it gives special emphasis to anything, probably it is in the line of fervent evangelism. The entire administration and teaching force, the whole life of the institution, is set to the high notes of soul winning.'<sup>35</sup> Southwestern trained a great number of Texas Baptist pastors over the ensuing decades; through them, they spread their soul-winning convictions to many Texas Baptist churches.

This mission emphasis carried the Texas Baptists through the conflict. Toby Druin wrote in the *Baptist Standard*,

Shunning controversy in favor of the things Baptists traditionally have done best – missions and evangelism – Texas Baptists in their 99<sup>th</sup> annual meeting here last week enthusiastically endorsed a plan to build 2,000 new churches in the state over the next five years and win the seven million lost people in it to Jesus Christ.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> C. E. Colton, 'Our Inerrancy Syndrome', *Baptist Standard*, 2 January 1980, p. 11.

<sup>35</sup> Cited in Glenn Thomas Carson, 'L. R. Scarborough and the Southwestern Dream', *The Journal of Texas Baptist History*, 14 (1994), 70–86 (p. 76). Carson describes the 'Southwestern Dream': 'For both Carroll and Scarborough, the heart of the "Southwestern Dream" was evangelism' (Carson, 'L. R. Scarborough and the Southwestern Dream', p. 70).

<sup>36</sup> Toby Druin, 'Mission Texas Gets an Enthusiastic "Yes!"', *Baptist Standard*, 7 November 1984, p. 3.

Presnall Wood wrote, ‘The Oct. 30–Nov. 1 state convention in Dallas, attended by an almost record 4,075 messengers, chose not to give their time to controversy but to a visionary and ambitious program called Mission Texas.’<sup>37</sup>

Texas Baptists maintained that their chief objective was to engage in missions and evangelise their state and world. The conflict was portrayed by the moderates as a distraction from their main objective. Through this, they were able to convince other Texas Baptists that inerrantist agitation should be ignored.

### **Conclusion: Why Was It So Effective?**

Research into collective identity has been ongoing since the 1970s. While this is not the place to rehearse the whole of that enterprise, some of the insights of the research can help shed light on why the moderate’s use of unique aspects of Texas Baptist identity had such a powerful effect on the conflict. In their work on collective and national identity, Ohad David and Daniel Bar-Tal put forward six key features of collective identity: belief in a common fate; perception of differentiation from other groups; coordinated activity of members; sharing beliefs, attitudes, values, and norms; concern about the welfare of the group; and a perceived continuity with the group’s past and future.<sup>38</sup> Each of these, in varying degrees, played a part in the moderate’s marshalling of Texas Baptist identity to defeat the inerrantists and shows why their arguments had the effect they did.

First, the belief in a common fate is reflected in the rhetoric of takeover. The sentiment was, ‘If we do not stop them, then we could

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<sup>37</sup> Presnall H. Wood, ‘Editorial: Convention Committed to “Larger Issues”’, *Baptist Standard*, 7 November 1984, p. 6.

<sup>38</sup> Ohad David and Daniel Bar-Tal, ‘A Sociopsychological Conception of Collective Identity: The Case of National Identity as an Example’, *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 13, no. 4 (2009), 354–379 (p. 359); cf. Neta Oren and Daniel Bar-Tal, ‘Collective Identity and Intractable Conflict’, in *Identity Process Theory Identity, Social Action and Social Change*, ed. by Rusi Jaspal and Glynis M. Breakwell (Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 222–252 (pp. 223–24). While their research is primarily aimed at understanding national identity, they also use it for other groups, such as ethnic and racial groups within a nation (David and Bar-Tal, ‘Collective Identity’, p. 363).

lose everything.' Charles Wade used the possibility of dictatorial pastors taking over churches in order to stoke the fear of a takeover in the convention.<sup>39</sup> A letter to the editor of the *Baptist Standard* held out the spectre of a 'Baptist pope' under the leadership of inerrantists.<sup>40</sup> John Baugh believed that the destruction of the BGCT was a possibility if the inerrantists won.<sup>41</sup>

Second, the moderates also used the independence of Texas Baptists to demonstrate the uniqueness of their collective identity and differentiate them from the larger national convention: they were not the SBC, nor were they a farm team of the SBC. They were a unique, autonomous convention that could do things as they saw fit. Billy Ray Parmer wrote in the *Texas Baptists Committed* newsletter of the inerrantists, who 'want individuals and churches to do things a certain way', and of the moderates, who 'want people and churches to do things the Baptist Way which is voluntary cooperation and local decision making'.<sup>42</sup> Voluntarism was very much tied to independence: cooperation did not form a new organisation in which one party was over against another. Cooperation was always and ever between two independent organisations that remained such.

Third, their sense of coordinated activity was expressed through the long-term commitment to evangelism and missions, the shared activity of which helped define who they were. Since it was a part of their collective identity, any threat to it was a threat to their self-understanding, so the moderate rhetoric in favour of their shared mission proved especially fruitful. A repeated refrain in the *Baptist Standard* was the goodness and desirability of Texas Baptist mission efforts over against the divisiveness of the national convention. Presnall Wood wrote in 1988, 'Increasingly Texas Baptists feel good about Texas Baptist work while feeling uneasy about the arguing in the Southern

<sup>39</sup> Charles Wade, 'Don't Mess with Texas!'

<sup>40</sup> Joe R. Griffin, 'Letter to the Editor', *Baptist Standard*, 8 August 1979, p. 2.

<sup>41</sup> He referred to this potential outcome in two separate letters to Brian Harbour (John Baugh, Confidential Letter to Brian Harbour, 22 February 1995; John Baugh, 'Comments to the Baptists Distinctives Committee', submitted to Brian Harbour, 7 April 1995, John F. Baugh Papers, The Texas Collection, Baylor University).

<sup>42</sup> Billy Ray Parmer, 'We Are the Middle', *Texas Baptists Committed*, December 1994. The source has no pagination.



Baptist Convention. Texas Baptists must make sure that the division which is evident in the Southern Baptist Convention is not permitted to come into the Texas Baptist convention.<sup>43</sup>

Fourth, the commonality of beliefs, values, and norms proved crucial for the moderate case. Not only did they win the war to claim ‘conservative’ for themselves, they also promoted their distinctive beliefs and portrayed the inerrantists as a threat to those beliefs. The autonomy of the local church and the priesthood of the believer were the noteworthy doctrines which the moderates continually upheld as defining characteristics of Texas Baptists. The moderates continually pressed the distinctives of Baptist theology, namely, ‘the priesthood of believers, local church autonomy, the separation of church and state, and [belief] in the Bible (without a creed) as the final authority in matters of faith and practice’.<sup>44</sup> In 1994, the BGCT, at the urging of moderate leaders, appointed the Baptist Distinctives Committee, which would research and produce material on the distinctives mentioned above, further cementing their shared understanding of what it means to be Baptist.<sup>45</sup>

Fifth, concern for the welfare of the group was seen in the mobilisation of workers in the common cause of defending the convention, where the moderates proved especially effective at organising individuals for the sake of the whole. They divided the state into zones, and each zone had a leader who would keep track of existing supporters and recruit new ones to attend the annual state convention meeting, so that they might vote and defeat any inerrantist candidates or resolutions.<sup>46</sup> They also sponsored Youth Leadership Camps in order to

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<sup>43</sup> Presnall H. Wood, ‘San Antonio SBC Shows Need of Revival’, *Baptist Standard*, 22 June 1988, p. 6. He wrote much the same thing two years later when covering the SBC meeting in New Orleans (Presnall H. Wood, ‘New Orleans Affirms Direction of Convention’, *Baptist Standard* 20 June 1990, p. 6).

<sup>44</sup> ‘Texas Baptists Committed, ‘Do You Support the Ministry of the Baptist General Convention of Texas’, pamphlet, author’s personal collection.

<sup>45</sup> See Dan Martin, ‘Enrollment in Texas Baptist Schools Tops 31,000’, in *A Texas Baptist History Sourcebook: A Companion to McBeth’s Texas Baptists*, ed. by Joseph E. Early, Jr (Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press, 2004), pp. 627–29 (pp. 627–28).

<sup>46</sup> In a personal conversation, one former leader among the moderates told me that they were so effective at organising that they would usually know within just a few votes how many votes they would have at any given meeting.

find potential moderate leaders; identified as many churches as possible as being with the moderates, against them, or somewhere in between; and categorised pastors in the state according to their support of the moderate cause. So important was mobilisation that David Currie, leader of Texas Baptists Committed, wrote that if they could have enough votes 'for three or four straight years, [the inerrantists] might become so discouraged that they will give up the fight, as we did at the SBC level. That would bring peace to Texas Baptists.'<sup>47</sup>

Finally, the moderates were more successful in promoting their continuity with the history of Texas Baptists. They were the 'true conservatives', meaning they were the ones who stood in line with people like B. H. Carroll, L. R. Scarborough, and George W. Truett, all heroes of Texas Baptist history.<sup>48</sup> They would even call themselves 'the real Baptists', placing themselves not only in the line of Texas Baptist history but of Baptist history as a whole.<sup>49</sup>

An organisation grounded in its identity is not easily moved. When conflict came to the BGCT, and there was a threat of imminent change to their organisation, the Texas Baptist moderates were effective at informing their constituents of who they were, what they were committed to do, and the threat that those who represented change posed to their organisation. By doing so, it galvanised Texas Baptists as a whole to reject the inerrantist programme in a way that proved to be rare among Southern Baptists.

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<sup>47</sup> David R. Currie, Memo to 'A Very Select Group of Texas Baptists Pastors', 30 January 1996, author's personal collection.

<sup>48</sup> Presnall Wood wrote of an upcoming meeting of the state convention, 'Whatever is done or attempted by the convention will be in the context of the conservative. Conservative is a good word, and Texas Baptists are conservative.' (Presnall H. Wood, 'Eyes of Texas, Southern Baptists Are upon Us', *Baptist Standard*, 22 October 1980, p. 6).

<sup>49</sup> This was a favourite phrase of Texas Baptists Committed after the 1994 state convention. See Anon., 'Local Church Autonomy Wins Big', *Texas Baptists Committed*, December 1994, p. 1; Billy Ray Parmer, 'We Are the Middle', *Texas Baptists Committed*, December 1994, p. 5.

