

# **'Noose of conformity' tightens in Baptist life, observers assert\_120604**

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## **'Noose of conformity' tightens in Baptist life, observers assert**

**By Greg Warner**

(ABP) — Those who look for denominational trends are disturbed by several recent actions they say are tightening “the noose of conformity” in Baptist life.

In a smattering of actions across the Baptist map, several state conventions are narrowing the requirements for membership or the parameters of acceptable theology.

In Florida, Baptists enacted guidelines to enforce the “theological integrity” of member churches. In Missouri, the state's largest Baptist convention took the first steps toward excluding all churches that don't support the Southern Baptist Convention wholeheartedly.

In the North Carolina convention, traditionally considered a moderate stronghold, a move to restrict church mission funding to SBC causes alone is gaining support. And Kentucky Baptists elected as their president a professor from the flagship SBC seminary over the pastor of the flagship moderate church.

Several other state conventions are flirting with adopting the conservative revision of the “Baptist Faith and Message” as their primary or sole doctrinal statement. And in Tennessee, where Baptists have studiously avoided theological controversy, Baptists will investigate the biblical views taught in their three affiliated Baptist colleges.

Some of the changes are subtle and others are piecemeal. But to some observers, the trend is obvious — and ominous.

“The results of this year's state convention meetings certainly must be discouraging for Baptists who thought they could avoid SBC fundamentalism by investing themselves and their energies in the states,” said Marv Knox, editor of the Baptist Standard of Texas.

“From affirmations of the 'conservative resurgence,' to demands for loyalty to the SBC's creed, to professor-presidents, to rebukes of whatever the SBC condemns, the noose of conformity is tightening,” Knox told Associated Baptist Press. “The 2004 meetings illustrate an important truth: SBC fundamentalists won't rest until they control a convention in every state.”

Moderate Baptists, who were pushed out of leadership in the national Southern Baptist Convention during a two-decade fight with conservatives, have long feared the battle would shift to state conventions, independent organizations that participate voluntarily — and with differing degrees of enthusiasm — in the national convention.

Some state conventions have remained a refuge for moderates, such as Virginia and Texas, prompting conservatives to set up alternative conventions of their own in those two states. Other state conventions, such as Florida and Missouri have become increasingly hostile to moderates.

“This is the next turn of the screw,” said Bruce Prescott, executive director of Mainstream Oklahoma Baptists and a leader in the Mainstream Baptist Network, which has fought the rising influence of conservatives in the state

conventions. “The fundamentalists have done everything they can do at the national level, so now they are doing it state by state.”

The tightening of standards is “a good thing,” countered Gregory Wills, who teaches church history at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky. For much of the last century, Baptist associations and conventions have shied away from enforcing standards of faith and practice, the conservative professor said. “What that has meant is you don't always know what denominational fellowship and union means.”

“The right of association includes the right to determine membership,” said Wills, who has written about church discipline. Denying conventions that right “would force them to accept churches whose belief and practice they consider to be inimical to Christ and his gospel,” he said.

Church historian Bill Leonard, dean of the moderate Divinity School at Wake Forest University, agreed, adding no one should be surprised by the tightening standards.

“I'm an old-timey Baptist about this,” Leonard said. “Baptist organizations have every right to shape their policies as they choose. If the majority decides to change those rules and set limits on membership, then the people who stay choose to live in those boundaries.”

The surprising factor, Leonard said, is that dissenting Baptists have put up with the restrictive changes for so long without leaving the SBC.

After conservatives solidified control of the Southern Baptist Convention and its agencies in the 1990s, they moved cautiously on the state level. But in recent years, state leaders sympathetic to the national SBC direction have gotten bolder.

The most dramatic change — although it would not take effect for a year — came in Missouri. The conservative-oriented Missouri Baptist Convention

agreed to vote next year on four constitutional changes that would limit membership to churches which are identified as “Southern Baptist” and which are affiliated solely with the Missouri Baptist Convention.

If approved, the changes would exclude congregations that support the alternative state convention established by moderates, the Baptist General Convention of Missouri. Likewise, congregations that support the state and national Cooperative Baptist Fellowship would not be allowed to participate.

No congregation could be a Missouri Baptist Convention church without cooperating with the Southern Baptist Convention, a move that departs from Baptist tradition.

The convention would have the right to examine churches' contributions to determine whether those congregations support other national or state conventions or other bodies that act like national or state conventions, such as the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

Meanwhile, the Florida Baptist Convention tightened its bylaws to enforce the “theological integrity” of member churches and associations. The change requires each Florida Baptist church to adhere to the 2000 “Baptist Faith and Message” doctrinal statement “or any other declaration of faith which parallels the tenets of our historic Baptist faith.”

“Any church or association which undertakes questionable theology, faith, practice or polity shall be subject to having fellowship withdrawn by the Florida Baptist State Convention,” the bylaw amendment reads.

Another revision requires member churches to file a standardized statistical report each year and contribute at least \$250 to the Cooperative Program. A church that violates either requirement for three consecutive years can be expelled.

And at the Tennessee Baptist Convention, messengers asked a committee to investigate what is taught at Carson-Newman College in Jefferson City, Belmont University in Nashville and Union University in Jackson. A current Carson-Newman student alleged some of that college's professors — particularly in the religion and science departments — teach that the Bible has errors and contradictions.

In North Carolina, Mississippi, Alabama and Texas, messengers considered but declined restrictive measures.

The Baptist State Convention of North Carolina considered a motion to abolish its alternative giving plans that allow churches to pick which mission organizations to fund. The motion would have deleted money for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, Baptist World Alliance and other moderate causes. Messengers voted to keep the convention's four giving plans intact, but observers say a similar action is likely to pass in the future.

The Mississippi Baptist Convention avoided an effort to make the “Baptist Faith and Message” — revised in 2000 to incorporate more conservative views — the convention's doctrinal statement. Instead, messengers voted to make the 2000 statement “a guide for understanding and teaching Baptist doctrine.”

In Alabama, a motion was introduced that would have called for each Alabama Baptist agency to stipulate the Alabama Baptist State Convention as its “sole member,” an action already taken by Southern Baptist agencies to prevent trustees from breaking away from the SBC. The motion was ruled out of order, since convention bylaws say charter changes can come only from those trustees.

In a role reversal in Texas, it was the moderate-controlled Baptist General Convention of Texas that considered, then rejected, an amendment to limit

Executive Board representation to churches affiliated solely with the BGCT. The action was aimed at churches dually aligned with the BGCT and the conservative Southern Baptists of Texas Convention.

Prescott, the Mainstream leader from Oklahoma, said the state-level actions by conservatives have been long expected. "Those who have denied it would happen now just don't want to hear about it," he said. "It's just a matter of how long it will take people to get fed up."

Prescott said he didn't expect Baptists to tolerate the new restrictions as long as they have. But rather than flocking to alternative groups like Mainstream Baptists and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, he said, most Baptists have simply chosen to be less involved in denominational life.

He said the restrictive trend is a departure from historical Baptist practice, which has favored congregational autonomy.

But Wills, director of Southern Seminary's Center for the Study of the Southern Baptist Convention, said that deference toward congregational freedom has occurred mostly in the 20th century. "The right for an association or convention to expel churches has only been questioned at times in the 20th century," he said.

Local Baptist associations used to enforce doctrinal parameters in the 19th century but are less inclined to now, he said. More recently state and national conventions have taken over that role "by default," he said.

Wills said the constitutional change in the Florida convention requiring theological integrity is appropriate. But he is "uncertain" about the membership changes proposed in Missouri, which require affiliation with the SBC but prohibit affiliation with the CBF. "I don't think that has any precedent," he said. "It has some merit, but it may be wrong."

Wake Forest's Leonard agreed the practice of setting parameters

“permeates Baptist life” through the years. The result is fragmentation has been an undeniable part of the Baptist legacy.

Those parameters can be theological or even political, as in the birth of the SBC. The Southern Baptist Convention got its start when Baptists in the North decided slave owners could not be missionaries, causing Baptists in the South to split, Leonard said.

Then and now, “churches have to decide how far they can go with those groups in participating in a certain kind of regimentation,” Leonard said.

Baptists have always been more apt to fragment than split, he said. In recent years, for instance, “small pieces” of the old denominational system have splintered off — such as the colleges that have broken away from state convention control and the new non-SBC seminaries that have emerged, he said. “These are ways in which the system has responded.”

“Everybody is disengaging from the denominational system,” he concluded. “Even people sympathetic [to the conservative direction of the SBC] are not paying attention to their system anymore.”

But rank-and-file Southern Baptists remain reluctant to break away from the Southern Baptist Convention, Leonard acknowledged. What would it take for that to happen?

“Each community has to decide when their community stops ceases to be Baptist,” Leonard said.

But is there a point where a convention clearly crosses the line?

“If they started baptizing infants or they start having real bishops instead of de facto ones, then they cease to be Baptist.”

in the BGCT, the Southern Baptist Convention ( SBC ) and around the world.