

# Can a university be distinctively Baptist and academically excellent? Or\_seay\_92203

December 5, 2006

Posted: 9/19/03


## Can a university be distinctively Baptist and academically excellent? â Or ...

**By Chris Seay**

As I travel the country speaking to pastors, I get a lot of questions about my commitment to our denomination. I believe denominations are quickly becoming dinosaurs. So, many wonder why I invest my time and resources as a Texas Baptist. I tell them straight up that the Baptist General Convention of Texas is more like a family than a denomination. While segments of the Baptist faith have been fighting with moderates, Jews, Catholics and Mickey Mouse, my friends in Texas have been focusing on being the presence of Christ, starting churches, feeding the hungry, caring for orphans, opposing the death penalty and avoiding the wrong kind of controversy.

Maybe I spoke too soon. While the BGCT has remained above the fray, Baptists on the Brazos have locked themselves in a no-holds-barred cage match and thrust the worst stereotypes of people of faith onto the international stage. I, for one, have had enough. If being in the Baptist or Baylor family means taking sides and arms against one another, then I am

opting out.


<b>Baylor's</b>
<b>quest:</b>
<a href="#">Joel</a>
<a href="#">Gregory</a>
<a href="#">Ella</a>
<a href="#">Wall</a>
<a href="#">Prichard</a>
<a href="#">Chris</a>
<a href="#">Seay</a>

The world we live in has changed. If the booming churches of the 1950s were the Baptist equivalent of the Promised Land, then we are living in exile. Emerging generations have little connection with Christ or the church; they see Christians as irrelevant and angry, and church involvement is at an all-time low. The new world is post-modern, post-colonial, post-Christian and post-denominational.

My calling is to be a missional leader in that new world, pointing people toward the beauty of the redemption found only in Christ. Fighting Baptists are making that job harder every day. Back me in a corner, and I'll come out swinging, but I don't want to fight. There are better and more important things to do.

I especially don't want to watch Baptists exchange blows. "Saturday Night Boxing" on HBO has become one of my favorite pastimes, but those guys fight much fairer than Baptists. They tap gloves before they start, back up when the opponent is down on the mat and often hug after 10 long rounds. Baptists fight 'til the death, and many pastors like me are walking away from the institutions that seem hell-bent on self-destruction.

A decade and a half removed from the heyday of denominational controversy, a group of old-school Baptists are returning to the ring like an elderly George Foreman for one more fight. If the unrestrained tirade we heard this summer in the Ferrell Center is any indication, this attack is as vulgar as a Mike Tyson bout and equally bewildering. We only have one satisfactory foe—the fundamentalists—so we pin their face on every opponent we encounter. The chubby mug of Jerry Falwell or Paige Patterson is being carefully pasted on the profile of Baylor President Robert Sloan. If you look twice, you will see clearly that it doesn't fit the six-and-a-half-foot-tall president.

Maybe you can't teach old dogs new tricks. In 1990, we needed some pit bulls to protect Baylor and the BGCT from a takeover, and they did their job. The problem with pit bulls is once they have been trained to fight and they get their first taste of blood, they become killers and eventually have to be put down. It is time for the warriors to lay down their swords. There will be problems and disagreements, but they should be solved in a face-to-face sit-down, not by maligning one another in anonymous documents, the Baptist Standard or the Houston Chronicle.

Call me an idealist, but I have dreams to see all denominations work together. On the mission field, it is common to see pastors abandon their denominational dogma for the sake of the gospel. The reality of a world in need of the redemption found only in Christ creates a focus and clarity we lack. Conflict is inevitable; it is the distinct way we deal with it that makes us Christian.

Those who are airing nasty thoughts to the press are making matters much worse. To the faculty member who called Sloan “an evil person,” I am bringing a vote of no confidence until he learns to talk nice. To the alumna who offered to donate money for Sloan to start his own school (a la Bob Jones), I'm offering matching funds for her to take anger-management classes. If you are unable to say something kind, or at least speak in a

cordial manner, it is time to stop talking. And so I shall.

Baylor has a long tradition of appointing ordained pastors to her presidency. With a few exceptions, the presidents have been pastors. It is safe to say the learning curve is steep when making the transition from the pulpit to the chief executive office of a large university. Robert Sloan has made plenty of those mistakes. He has the respect of Baptist churches and was appointed to close the gap between Baylor and Texas Baptists. He is an extraordinary Bible teacher, family man and friend of the church. He also has failed to rally other significant populations of faculty and supporters to his cause—mostly due to some highprofile gaffes and differences in values. But blunders and semantics don't justify the hostility and hatred in the air in Waco.

Baylor always has been a lighthouse for intelligent young pastors. God has blessed me as a pastor and author by the things that I learned there. While at Baylor as a young student/pastor, President Herbert Reynolds came to visit my church. After the church service, he embraced me with the kindest words a mentor could speak to a young minister and silently dropped a hundred dollar bill in my shirt pocket (only Dave Bliss gives out more money than our former president). The administration of Baylor University has always sought a strong relationship with the church and her pastors. Which is the reason all these leaders must sit at a table to pray, critique, apologize, vent, listen and reconcile.

Baylor exists for the sake of the church. She is “Pro Ecclesia” and “Pro Texana.” So, resolve these differences. Our success in Texas rests in Baylor's hands.

The path of peace is not easy. It is time to seek a better way. Jesus said clearly that the world would know his disciples by the way we love one another. I wonder who they think we are; we fight more often than Oscar de la Hoya or Mike Tyson.

It is time for the lovers to take the helm of denominational life. The work of the gospel has very little to do with power. It is more about grace, service and reconciliation. In the midst of the controversy at Baylor, we need the fighters to embrace their enemy and allow for the transition to peacetime.

*Chris Seay, a Baylor graduate, is an author and pastor of Ecclesia in Houston*

News of religion, faith, missions, Bible study and Christian ministry among Texas Baptist churches, in the BGCT, the Southern Baptist Convention ( SBC ) and around the world.