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By Greg Warner

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FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP)—Southwestern Seminary President Paige Patterson has endorsed Ronnie Floyd for Southern Baptist Convention president, prompting a rare rebuttal from SBC chief executive Morris Chapman and exposing a growing rift between the two Southern Baptist executives.

Meanwhile, critics of Floyd's "dismal" financial support of the denomination are trying to enlist another presidential candidate with a better record of cooperation. In recent days, that search has focused on Frank Page, pastor of First Baptist Church of Taylors, S.C. But as of May 15 he had not made a decision about the nomination.

Floyd, pastor of First Baptist Church of Springdale, Ark., is the presidential choice of the convention's fundamentalist leaders, who have controlled the presidency—and, hence, the SBC's bureaucracy—for almost three decades, usually without opposition.

Floyd's nomination, announced May 7, focused new attention to his

church's lackluster support of the Cooperative Program, the SBC's central ministry budget, as well as his high-tech evangelism methods—particularly the firetruck-shaped baptistry and confetti cannons used in Springdale's children's ministry.

Patterson, an architect of the SBC's conservative power structure and now president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, called the firetruck baptistry "blasphemous" in a 2000 interview—probably without knowing it was Floyd's church.

Patterson didn't mention the baptistry in his May 12 endorsement of Floyd, released by the seminary's public relations office. But he did praise the Springdale church's evangelistic commitment, which he said "inculcates the ethos of New Testament Christianity."

He also praised Floyd's denominational service and support of seminaries, adding: "Southern Baptists need a man whose moral fiber is unscathed by compromise with the world in respect to his home, his purity of life and his integrity. Ronnie Floyd is such a man."

Patterson was president of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1999 and 2000.

In a cautiously worded commentary May 13, Chapman took issue with any SBC agency head serving as a convention officer or endorsing someone else for office.

"Nominating or being nominated for an elected officer of the SBC, or endorsing a nominee for an elected office, in my opinion, lessens the importance of the work to which the entity head has been called," Chapman wrote in his blog, morrischapman.com.

"When a president of an entity publicly endorses a potential nominee or nominates a candidate for elected office, he potentially alienates some who

otherwise hold him in high esteem because they differ with the person he has embraced publicly for an elected office.”

“Today political strategies, agendas, and power politics threaten to distract us from empowered possibilities of a people who rely solely upon God’s guidance,” Chapman wrote.

The “potential for conflict exists if the president of an SBC entity is at the same time the president of the Southern Baptist Convention,” he added. The president serves ex officio on the SBC’s most powerful agency boards, including the SBC Executive Committee, which votes on funding for the agencies, Chapman noted.

Although that situation existed when Patterson served as president, Chapman did not mention him by name.

Conservatives have long acknowledged the behind-the-scenes feud between Patterson and Chapman, but it has never boiled over publicly.

Chapman has a long record of calling for more openness in SBC leadership. When he was elected SBC president twice in the early 1990s, he called for “broadening the tent” of leadership. More recently, at the 2004 SBC meeting, he warned that “crusading conservatives” need to loosen their grip on the SBC or risk driving it into exclusivism and “Pharisaism.”

Ronnie Floyd, as the presidential candidate endorsed by Patterson and the movement’s other political leaders, matches the profile for SBC presidents of the last 27 years. A former president of the SBC Pastors’ Conference, he also was chairman of the Executive Committee. He is pastor of Arkansas’ largest Southern Baptist church, with 16,000 members.

Complicating the picture for Floyd, however, a blue-ribbon SBC panel is calling for the election of officers who come from churches that contribute at least 10 percent of their undesignated receipts to the denomination’s

central budget—a standard few recent presidents could meet.

First Baptist Church of Springdale and its satellite congregation, the Church at Pinnacle Hills, contributed a total of \$32,000 to the Cooperative Program in 2005 through the Arkansas Baptist State Convention—0.27 percent of its undesignated receipts of \$11,952,137.

The church reports giving another \$189,000 to the national Cooperative Program, which bypasses Arkansas missions—1.8 percent of undesignated receipts.

The church's CP giving has been on decline since at least 1986, including the years Floyd was chairman of the Executive Committee, which sets and promotes the Cooperative Program.

By contrast, First Baptist Church of Taylors, a much smaller congregation where Frank Page is pastor, contributed \$535,000 to the Cooperative Program in 2005—or 12.1 percent of its undesignated budget of \$4,407,392.

Although Page is not well known outside of the Southeast, he might have an advantage with the convention being held in Greensboro, N.C. And while denominational support won't be the only issue in this year's presidential election, it expects to be front and center.