

# **SBC, CBF @ crossroads**

June 14, 2012

The Southern Baptist Convention will elect its first African-American president. The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship will contemplate its direction under a leader to be named later.

## **Healing moment; right prez**

The SBC will take a huge healing leap when messengers select Fred Luter as president. He's a solid choice for a convention seeking to shed its racist image—an image recently and ironically compounded by the leader of its ethics agency.

Luter is pastor of Franklin Avenue Baptist Church in New Orleans, where the SBC meets June 19-20. Luter started out as a street preacher and built Franklin Avenue Baptist into one of the strongest congregations in the Big Easy. He led his church to survive Hurricane Katrina due to incomprehensible courage, voluminous faith and sheer force of will.

As an SBC vice president, he has represented the convention well across the nation. He's a powerful and popular preacher. It's practically impossible to think of any knowledgeable Baptist who does not admire and respect Fred Luter.

Of course, the SBC got its start because of race. Baptists in the South owned slaves and felt their missionaries should be able to own slaves, too. The American Baptists, headquartered in the North, decreed they would not appoint slave-holders, so the Southerners seceded—15 years before the Civil War.

For generations, Southern Baptists tried to bleach away the stain of slavery and racism. They made great advances in the late 1960s and '70s, prodded

and guided by lion-hearted leaders at the SBC's Home Mission Board and Christian Life Commission, plus a handful of pastors. Still, the stain persisted. In 1995, the convention actually repented of its 150-year-old sin. But with "Southern" as its first name, the stigma still persisted. That, and the fact African Americans still rode at the back of the SBC's leadership bus.

Luter stands to change all that. It will be hard to accuse the Southern Baptists of abject racism when their leader is a black preacher.

### **Uh-oh**

But some Southern Baptists still do their part to perpetuate pariahship.

Richard Land, head of the SBC Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, actually earned a decent reputation for combatting racism. He has spoken on behalf of racial reconciliation and against racial oppression.

Unfortunately, he's more partisan than prophetic. So, he jumped on a political opportunity. He accused President Obama of using the Trayvon Martin murder case to stir up racial resentment. Observers noted this seemed to be exactly what Land was doing at the time. And he also committed plagiarism, copping much of the diatribe that got him in trouble.

Although some SBC messengers may call for Land's resignation or removal, don't count on it. The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission's board already dealt Land a humiliating punishment. They turned off his microphone—pulling the plug on his radio program, *Richard Land Live!* But they'll probably keep him on for a couple of reasons. First, he's 65 and near the end of his career. They can let him go a little while longer and let him leave on his own terms. And second, by their lights, he's been doing exactly what they paid him to do. For more than a quarter-century, Land has been a fighter in the Baptist "holy war" and in the larger culture wars. They're not likely to give their adversaries the satisfaction of watching one of their

aging icons expire from friendly fire.

### **Three issues for CBF**

As soon as the SBC annual meeting ends, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship's general assembly will kick off a two-day run in Fort Worth. Three issues—two on the agenda and one not—are likely to occupy CBFers' attention.

### **Celebrating Vestal**

First will be the retirement of CBF's longtime coordinator, Daniel Vestal. He will step down as the organization's top staff leader this summer. So, he will deliver his final address to CBF and be feted at a farewell reception when the general assembly draws to a close.

Texas Baptists know Vestal as a living legend. Oldtimers remember "Danny Vestal" as a scintillating youth evangelist who led hundreds, perhaps thousands, of teenagers to faith in Jesus before he was old enough to vote. Later, he was pastor of several leading Texas churches and one in suburban Atlanta.

On the national stage, Vestal accepted appointment to the SBC Peace Committee in the mid-1980s, when the "holy war" raged. He held a unique position—someone recognized as truly neutral and possibly a mediator in the movement to mend the widening rift in the convention. But Vestal's experience on the Peace Committee obviously opened his eyes to the hardball politics of the convention's right wing, and he expressed shock and horror at what he saw. A few years later, he helped so-called moderates launch the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship as a haven for "free and faithful" Baptists. And a few years after that, he became CBF's second coordinator.

Since then, Vestal has held a hard job. The heat generated by the Southern Baptist schism cooled. Many of the old guard who fought the "holy war"

and helped fund the new CBF have headed home to heaven. And many of CBF's young leaders have no memory of, much less passion for, the battles out of which the organization developed.

So, CBF has struggled for identity in recent years. Consequently, budgets have languished. Staff has been cut. Allocations to CBF's ministry partners have been reduced. CBF faces a time of transition that begs for clear identity.

Still, Vestal will be remembered for his multiple passions—for loving Jesus, for evangelism and missions, for Baptist principles and ideals, for faith formation, for the local church. The CBF will celebrate those remarkable qualities and express their gratitude for his leadership.

But they will leave not knowing the identity of his successor. The search committee, led by George Mason, pastor of Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, is wisely taking its time to do deliberate work. This gives CBF time and space to bid farewell to Vestal and provides an opportunity for the new coordinator to start on her or his own terms.

### **Task force report**

Vision will be the subject of the second major agenda item at the general assembly. A task force has spent the past couple of years listening to CBF Baptists and has drafted a report to guide the organization into the future.

Participants are expected to adopt that report, which will help define CBF's mission and vision, reorganize its governance structure and redefine its relationships with state and regional affiliates. This is enormously important for CBF. But it's also very "inside baseball"—so much so that only CBF geeks can explain it. To other CBF geeks.

### **Unofficial, but present**

The third important CBF issue in Fort Worth is not on the agenda, but you can bet it's on the mind of practically everyone traveling to Cowtown: What about homosexuals?

For years, CBF's basic position on homosexuality has been the same as thousands and thousands of Baptist churches': "Don't ask; don't tell." And ironically—because SBC leaders have hammered CBF as being "pro-gay"—its official policy is quite conservative. It calls for "faithfulness in marriage between a man and a woman and celibacy in singleness" and it prohibits the organization from hiring gays and lesbians.

This winter, the outgoing CBF moderator, Colleen Burroughs, said she wanted the organization to "have a conversation" on homosexuality and suggested it should drop its gay-hiring ban. Burroughs' statement, combined with CBF's decision to co-host a conference on human sexuality this spring, has caused the organization's adversaries to claim, "See, I told you so" and frightened many CBFers who worry they're right.

But the gay-hiring ban and CBF's stated position advocating only sex within a male-female marriage or celibacy aren't anywhere close to changing. The issue isn't even on the agenda this year. And the incoming moderator and moderator-elect aren't likely to place it on the agenda in the next two years.

Despite what CBF's detractors say, the organization is not monolithic on homosexuality and homosexual practice. Some CBFers are welcoming and affirming; others are as conservative on the issue as any Southern Baptist.

### **Challenge going forward**

Over the past two decades, one of the most compelling aspects of CBF has been its ability—even its eagerness—to provide common ground for Baptists who don't agree on all issues. CBF was launched by Baptists who were ostracized by the Southern Baptist Convention because they did not

hold a very specific and conservative view of Scripture. They understood the pain of being rejected by their "home" convention because they did not agree 100 percent with its new leaders.

If CBF holds to its noble heritage, it will find a way to cooperate across diversity, while pouring energy into shared commitments—the lordship of Christ, the primacy of missions and evangelism, the necessity of serving the poorest and most disenfranchised people on earth, the vital importance of theological education, and the vibrancy of the local church.

And if CBF turns loose of that heritage, "moderate" Baptists will wander through the 21st century without a national spiritual home.