

Analysis: Why some churches are leaving CBF

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Ironically, churches who disagree on substantive issues find common ground in criticizing the results of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship's Illumination Project, in particular the changes to the CBF hiring policy regarding LGBT individuals.

While some [churches continue to connect](#) with the CBF after a change in its hiring policy following the Illumination Project, other churches—generally those at each end of the spectrum from traditional to progressive—have elected or are in the process of deciding to disassociate from the CBF.

Churches who are staying connected with CBF cite various reasons for their decision, including CBF's approach to missions and its strong adherence to autonomy of the local church.

Churches who are deciding to leave the Fellowship also value CBF's approach to missions and the strong value placed on local church autonomy, but they cite the new hiring policy as the ultimate deciding factor for them.

What about CBF's new hiring policy troubles traditional churches?

Tommy Hood, former pastor of Lakeshore Drive Baptist Church in Hudson Oaks and current pastor of Central Baptist Church in Johnson City, Tenn., currently is engaged with his congregation in its decision process, saying, "Our deacons are presently praying about it."

“Some may wonder why a church would consider disconnecting from the CBF over something like their revised hiring policy removing language prohibiting the ‘purposeful hiring’ of ‘a practicing homosexual’ or the funding of those who “advocate or affirm homosexual practice,” Hood said.

“The disagreement arises over whether or not homosexual behavior is sinful, a question the CBF’s Illumination Project Committee purposely didn’t ask,” Hood said. “Because Baptists have long maintained that we have no creed but the Bible, an important question for us has always been, ‘What does the Bible say?’”

Hood went on to explain, “With regard to homosexual behavior, the traditional answer for Baptists, and indeed for the church throughout her history, is well known. There is no text of Scripture affirming or commending homosexual behavior in any form.

“In spite of that, the CBF has tacitly affirmed without question a very hermeneutically weak (in my view) reinterpretation of the biblical texts that essentially reclassifies a behavior formerly considered sinful as instead being representative of God’s creative intent and purpose.”

Concerned about what he sees, Hood said, “The CBF may maintain that it doesn’t take official positions on such questions, but the signs all appear to point in one direction, and the proverbial writing would seem to be upon the wall.”

Concerns about the implementation procedure

Hood further cited the implementation procedure for the new hiring policy, saying, “It has angered the ‘affirming’ churches because it says ‘CBF will employ persons for leadership positions . . . who practice a traditional

Christian sexual ethic of celibacy in singleness or faithfulness in marriage between a woman and a man.’”

Seeking clarification, Hood is concerned with apparent equivocation in the implementation procedure. “The IP Committee says this procedure ‘reflects the practices of an overwhelming number of our cooperating congregations.’ But leaders at the general assembly seemed very concerned to reassure the affirming churches with words to the effect that ‘procedure does not rise to the level of policy,’ ‘the procedure is non-binding,’ and ‘procedure is at the discretion of the staff.’”

One concern of those with a traditional view of sexuality is that the implementation procedure seeks to “appease that ‘overwhelming number of cooperating congregations’” forming CBF’s base, “while in fact the procedure is toothless and could be eliminated by the 16-member CBF Governing Board with no public notice whatsoever,” which “may reassure those who affirm homosexual behavior, but is alarming” to some traditionalists.

Funding options for churches troubled by CBF’s new hiring policy

For churches agreeing with the [BGCT](#) and [BGAV](#) decisions to stop forwarding funds to CBF in response to the latter’s new hiring policy, CBF has presented funding options. Funds may be designated for CBF Global Missions or state-level CBF affiliates such as CBF Texas or Fellowship Southwest. Through these options, churches and individuals can continue supporting ministries they cherish.

How traditional churches are reviewing their relationship to CBF

Hood describes himself as Central's "shepherd not their dictator" and "can't yet say whether or not the church will disconnect completely the way others [similar to Central] quietly have." Should Central decide to leave CBF, the congregation's decision will be informed by their belief "that the same risen Lord who inspired the Apostle Paul to write Galatians 3:28 also inspired him to write Romans 1:24-27."

Leaving CBF elicits mixed feelings.

Those churches deciding to leave CBF practice the historic Baptist principle of soul freedom and local church autonomy. They leave CBF as a matter of conscience grounded in their communal interpretation of the Bible. In this respect, they are not unlike those churches who elect to stay with CBF. As such, the principles both groups of churches espouse are upheld.

Churches deciding to disassociate from CBF have not and are not doing so lightly. They began their association with CBF on the basis of shared beliefs and common mission interests. Feeling compelled to end that relationship is accompanied by grief.

EDITOR'S NOTE: I was pastor of First Baptist Church in Covington when it decided to disassociate from CBF.

To help First Covington make its decision about denominational affiliations, the congregation was provided information about local, state, and national Baptist bodies that identified where each of those groups is positioned on a set of issues important to the church, including sexuality. In addition, representatives of some groups were invited to speak to the congregation

on successive Sunday mornings.

First Covington, aware of the funding options presented by CBF, was not comfortable supporting a religious organization open to hiring people who might be engaged in sexual practices the church identifies as “[illegitimate](#).”

After First Covington had the opportunity to learn more about denominational affiliations and to discuss those connections, the congregation decided by a wide majority in May 2018 to disassociate from CBF, stating they “do not share the views of the CBF regarding” its lack of a unified position on sexuality.

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