Moderate Baptist leader Cecil Sherman dies

April 17, 2010

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) — Cecil Sherman, 82, one of the most visible moderate leaders in the Southern Baptist Convention controversy of the 1980s and first coordinator of the breakaway [Cooperative Baptist Fellowship](#) , died April 17 from complications of a heart attack.

Sherman suffered a massive heart attack April 15. Paramedics resuscitated him and transported him to Virginia Commonwealth University Medical Center in Richmond, Va., where he died two days later.

Cecil Sherman

"Baptists have lost a great champion, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship has lost its founding coordinator and I have lost a friend," said Daniel Vestal, executive coordinator of the Atlanta-based Fellowship. "But I celebrate his fruitful life and the resurrection hope we have in Jesus Christ."

Lex Horton, executive vice president of Smyth & Helwys, publisher of Sherman's 2008 autobiography [By My Own Reckoning](#) , recalled him as a "combination of care, insight, wit, tenacity, common sense, faithfulness and hard work."

"Well done, ye good and faithful servant, indeed!" Horton remarked in an e-mail. "He will be missed."

Sherman was born Dec. 26, 1927, in Fort Worth, Texas, the oldest of three children. He earned his B.A. degree at Baylor University; B.D. at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary; Th.M. at Princeton Theological Seminary; and Th.D. at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

While at Southwestern he met Dorothy "Dot" Hair, who was 10 years his senior. They were married Dec. 23, 1953, in Greer, S.C. She preceded him in death.

Sherman was pastor of First Baptist Church in Chamblee, Ga., from 1956 to 1960. While there Dot Sherman gave birth to Genie, their only child, who survives.

He moved to First Baptist Church in College Station, Texas, where he began his first work in larger denominational life, speaking at Baptist Student Union retreats. He joined the staff of the Baptist General Convention of Texas to coordinate campus evangelism, where he worked until Aug. 1, 1964, when he was called to become pastor of First Baptist Church in Asheville, N.C.

On his sixth Sunday as pastor, one of a group of African-American women who had been attending worship asked him if she could join the church. He welcomed her.

Overhearing the conversation, the chairman of deacons took Sherman aside and pointed out a policy that votes concerning church membership must be unanimous. Since the church had no black members, the deacon told him, there was no possibility the vote would be unanimous and suggested he tell the woman not to come forward to avoid bad publicity.

Instead Sherman set out to change the policy, prompting a showdown with deacons opposed to integration and rumors that he had been sent to integrate the church by the NAACP.

A majority of church members voted to open the church to black members, but not enough to get a two-thirds majority required to change the constitution.

The race issue emerged again in 1968, when Sherman was asked if the sanctuary of First Baptist Church would be available for a memorial service following the assassination of Martin Luther King. He said yes without checking with the deacon chair.

"The NAACP is the very essence of evil to some of the people in this room," Sherman said in his sermon the Sunday before King was buried. "You don't like the NAACP. You don't like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Dr. King." Sherman added of King: "He spoke for the poor. He was shot down while helping garbage men register their complaints. He was in the Jesus pattern." After that a deacon made a motion to change the church's membership policy. That time the motion passed. In 1970 FBC Asheville accepted its first black member since 13 black members withdrew to form a separate church in 1867.

Despite that rocky start, Sherman remained at Asheville for 20 years. In 1975 he led deacons at First Baptist Church to recommend church policy to permit women to be elected as deacons. The church voted down the recommendation, also, but changed its policy five years later, electing its first women deacons in 1981.

After a group of fundamentalists managed to elect their candidate as president of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1979, the *Religious Herald* quoted Paul Pressler, one of the leaders of the movement, outlining a plan to capture control of the SBC through appointment of trustees to boards, agencies and institutions.

Pressler, a Houston judge whom Sherman had known since his Princeton days, used the analogy that fundamentalists were going to "go for the

jugular."

Sherman responded by convening a meeting of 17 self-described denominational "loyalists," individuals heavily invested in the SBC and comfortable with its leadership and direction, to discuss a counter strategy to resist the fundamentalist movement in 1980. Meeting at a Holiday Inn in Gatlinburg, Tenn., the group earned the nickname the "Gatlinburg Gang."

"We are taking them at their word," Sherman told Baptist Press in 1980. "I regret this has come to pass, but I feel we have no choice."

Early resistance came from denominational leaders, the very people whose jobs the Gatlinburg Gang was trying to save. "We can handle these people" is how Sherman described their response. At one point, Sherman recalled, one seminary president told him, "You are more trouble to us than those people are," a reference to the fundamentalist leaders.

In 1985 Sherman was named to the SBC Peace Committee, formed to examine causes and propose solutions to the controversy. He termed the experience "a study in frustration." While moderates sought middle ground, he said, fundamentalists, who had a majority, were in no mood to compromise.

Sherman resigned from the committee after seminary presidents meeting in Glorieta, N.M., released a statement affirming the Bible as "not errant," an effort to appease the fundamentalist movement.

"I didn't think 'inerrancy' was an honest word to describe the Bible," Sherman wrote in his autobiography. "It is a slippery word. The less you know about the Bible, the easier it is to say the Bible is inerrant; the more you know about the Bible, the harder it is to use the word."

In 1985, Sherman left Asheville to become pastor of [Broadway Baptist Church](#) in Fort Worth, Texas, a position he held until 1992.

When disenfranchised moderates decided to form their own organization following the 1990 SBC annual meeting in New Orleans, they turned to Sherman. He took the job as first coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship at age 64.

When Sherman arrived at the CBF he was one of three staff members. When he retired June 30, 1996, there were 25 in the Atlanta office. In 1991 the CBF took in about $4.5 million from 391 churches. When Sherman left there were nearly 1,500 churches contributing not quite $15 million, and the number of missionaries supported by the CBF had grown to more than 100.

In retirement, Sherman served as an interim pastor and as visiting professor of pastoral ministries at Baptist Theological Seminary in Richmond. His writings include the Adult Formations Commentary published by Smyth & Helwys Publishing and used weekly by Sunday school teachers.

He also became a caregiver for his wife, who was diagnosed with Alzheimer's in 2001. She died Aug. 1, 2008, at age 90. Sherman was unable to be at her side, because he had just been diagnosed with acute myeloid leukemia and was undergoing treatment at M. D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston. Doctors initially gave him only weeks to live, but after experimental chemotherapy treatment he recovered enough to return to preaching and teaching.

In March he preached at the North Carolina Cooperative Baptist Fellowship general assembly.

Associated Baptist Press paid homage to Sherman with the news agency's Religious Freedom Award in 2008.

In addition to his daughter, Eugenia Sherman Brown, who lives in Madison, Wis., Sherman is survived by his brother, Bill Sherman, of Nashville, Tenn.,

his sister, Ruth, who lives in Oklahoma City, and a grandson, Nathaniel.

–Bob Allen is senior writer for Associated Baptist Press.