

# Interview: Kenneth Starr on Baylor's BGCT ties, religious identity

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WACO—[Baylor University](#) will [inaugurate](#) Kenneth Starr as its 14th president Sept. 17.

Before he arrived in Waco June 1, Starr was dean of the law school at [Pepperdine University](#) in California. Previously, he had been an attorney, U.S. circuit court judge, U.S. solicitor general and independent counsel for investigations during the Clinton administration.

A native Texan, he was raised in the Churches of Christ and was a longtime adult member of McLean Bible Church in northern Virginia. When he moved to Waco, he joined Columbus Avenue Baptist Church.

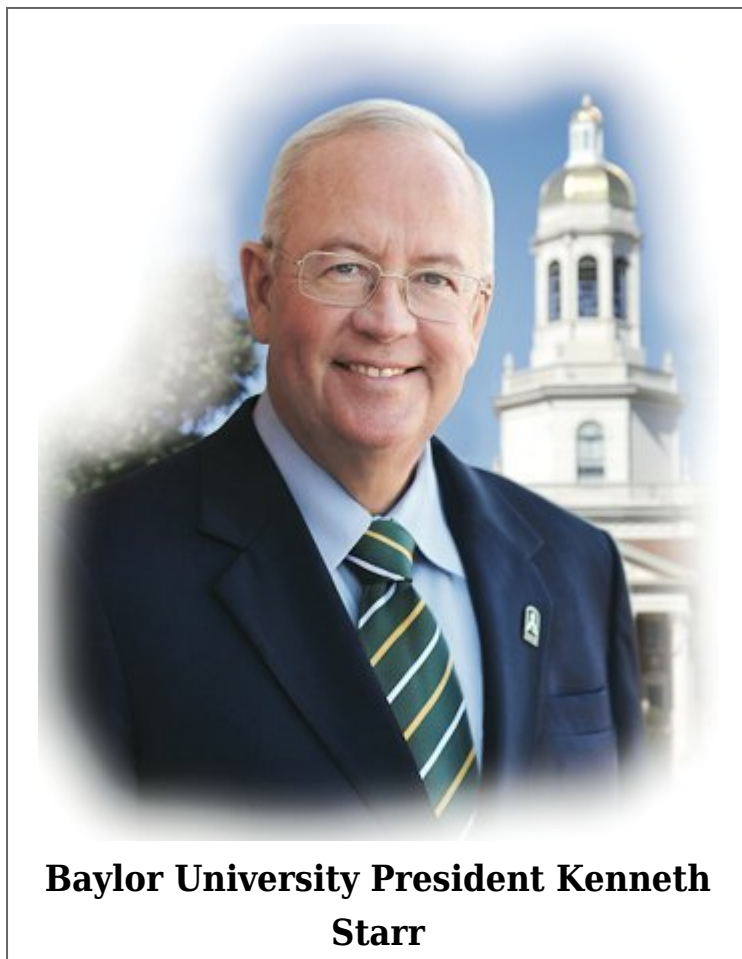
Leading up to his inauguration, Starr visited with *Baptist Standard* Editor Marv Knox about Baylor, his administration and the future of the Texas Baptist university.

[You can listen to an audio stream of the actual interview here.](#)

**✘ Texas Baptists have a long history with Baylor and still elect 25 percent of its regents. So, what is your ideal for the relationship between Baylor and the Baptist General Convention of Texas? And how do you see strengthening and maintaining that relationship?**

**✘** We treasure the relationship. Obviously, the BGCT continues to be supportive in a very direct and tangible way of our work here at Baylor. And so one of my early pleasures was coming to know the senior

leadership and a number of the members of the staff of the BGCT. I continue to treasure that as well as finding areas of mutual concern, such as the future of higher education in the Hispanic community.



I know the BGCT is focusing on the demographics of Texas and therefore the demographics of the changing church, and we at Baylor want to be a part of that conversation, working collaboratively as we try to be very intentional in furthering these areas of mutual interest and concern.

Also, one of the things I believe is important is the work of Baptist life through such institutions as Buckner in providing opportunities for worldwide service. So many of our students—69 percent—come from non-Baptist backgrounds. The strength of Baptist life includes the ability to tap into this vast reservoir as opportunities for service, and I use Buckner as a specific example. One need not start an orphanage in another country. If

one is called to do that, it is wonderful, but there are already so many existing opportunities for service, which our students already avail themselves of, literally around the world. And that's one of the great strengths of connectional community that is Baptist life.

So, I lift that up as a new member of the Baptist community and someone who comes out of the nondenominational world as being a very powerful strength and therefore attraction of being integrally involved in Baptist life. Baylor needs to lift that up. It's one of the things I lifted up to the BGCT leadership and the Buckner leadership is that I view the earliest days on campus as an opportunity for this largest Baptist university in the world to educate everyone—but especially the almost 70 percent of the student body—as to the vibrancy of Baptist life.

**✘ When you moved to Waco, you made good on a promise to join a Texas Baptist church—Columbus Avenue. What are the commonalities and differences between the church where you are a member now and your previous congregation in Northern Virginia, which was so important in your life?**

✘ Right, McLean Bible. Theologically, none. And in terms of the form of worship, Columbus Avenue has two services—one a more traditional service, which is pretty common, and then the second service is with a praise team and more focused on the college community. We enjoy that second service. I mean I love a traditional service. And so, other than the obvious changes of the set and so forth, the music and, frankly, even the style of preaching of Brian Dunks, the senior pastor of Columbus Avenue, is very similar to what I am accustomed to at McLean Bible Church.

**✘ You were very involved in ministries of the congregation before.**

**Have you had a chance to see how you will be able to plug in at the local-church level? I know you will be traveling.**

✘ That remains to be seen. I have been away about 50 percent of the time, plus it was over the summer. That remains to be seen.

✘ **When you became president of the world's largest Baptist university, you were the first president who didn't have a Baptist background. What does your election say about the future of Baylor and the future of its religious identity?**

✘ I'm not sure I'm the best one qualified to opine on that. It is a fact that 70 percent of our entering students come overwhelmingly from Christian households but not necessarily from Baptist congregations. Baylor has long been a very welcoming place for everyone. So, I suppose there is some indication that Baylor welcomes to the senior leadership those who were not previously in denominational life.

But it is important, and I reflected prayerfully on this, for the president of Baylor to be very intentionally involved in Baptist life, including, most fundamentally, being an active member of a Baptist church. So, I treasure that. I honor that. When I would travel, I would frequently find myself attending a Baptist church. First Baptist Church of Whatever ... First Baptist Church of Orlando. First Baptist Church of Richmond. And I could keep going. I've always felt very theologically and in terms of the style of worship comfortable in the Baptist community. So, it was not, for me, a large step—theologically or in forms of worship.

I certainly have always embraced the free-church tradition and what has been much more developed theologically in Baptist life—soul competency. There have been more centuries of reflection about these fundamental theological dimensions of our lives—individual conscience, freedom of

religion, soul competency. The great traditions of the free church have been more carefully thought out in Baptist life than they have in the denomination in which I grew up, the Churches of Christ. It's not that there has not been an intellectual tradition of theological reflection. But it has been richer and deeper in Baptist life.

I am a student—I still have much, much to learn—of the American founding. And I have long appreciated the role of Baptist pastor John Leland in helping shape the views of James Madison. And the fact Baptist pastors would find themselves tossed into jail in Virginia was a great source of outrage to the somewhat religiously challenged, theologically challenged (Thomas) Jefferson but also to Mr. Madison. They did not like the fact there was orthodoxy that was enforced through the arm of the state quite apart from religious exactments and so forth. And so the “Memorial and Remonstrance” that Mr. Jefferson and Mr. Madison championed in Virginia is all tied to Baptist life in Virginia, and that's part of Baptist history on which I grew up as a young lawyer and student of the constitution. And so these things have been very precious to me.

**✘ Does your study of history and of constitutional law synchronize with that aspect of the Baptist heritage?**

✘ Well, Mr. Jefferson's famous letter to the Danbury Baptists, which used the separation of church and state metaphor, was responsive to the concern that was very powerful at the time of the continuing establishments, soft though they were by that time, of state religions. And Massachusetts, of course, eradicated its establishment only in 1833. Of course, it was Massachusetts that essentially drove Roger Williams (founder of the first Baptist church in America) into Providence Plantation. All of this is the air that I breathe as a student of our constitutional history and the history of freedom in America.

**✘ There's been a difference among the "Baylor family," not so much about whether Baylor would remain a Christian university, but particularly given the leadership of the regents and some of the other parts of the Baylor constituency regarding what kind of Christian university Baylor will be. How will you lead Baylor in light of those somewhat similar and somewhat competing ideologies?**

**✘** I'm still listening and learning, and I still have a lot to learn. But one proposal that I'm currently very enthusiastic about is the creation of—and no final decision has been made—the Institute for Baptist Studies.

To me, being new to Baptist life, it seems vitally important for Baylor deeply to honor (the Baptist tradition) in a living way. Not simply to have a Founder's Day ceremony or whatever ... . But how can we be purposeful and intentional now? Our (Truett Theological) Seminary is a shining example of a commitment to having true excellence in the training of the pastors of tomorrow. So, I love being with the Truett family, learning from the Truett family, finding out how I can encourage them. I'm not burdened with theological training, and I long since learned to have an attitude and respect and deference, not blind deference, to those who have. I look to the leadership of (Dean) David Garland when he returns, and the acting dean: "You guide me. How I can encourage? What do we need to do to build our relationships with Baptist life, and make sure we are honoring it scrupulously and deepening that?"

I do not have a 10-point plan of action at this stage.

**✘ Do you feel Baylor can be a university of which both groups from the ends of that spectrum can be proud simultaneously?**

✘ I would think so. I personally, new that I am, see no impediment or obstacle to that as we see by virtue of the fact that the children of multigenerational Baylor families, deeply committed to their Baptist church, are very comfortable here, as are folks from nondenominational Christianity or other denominations.

I think that's true of the faculty as well.

✘ **What are the strengths and most important goals of [Baylor 2012](#) (the university's 10-year master plan)? And if you see any, what are its weaknesses?**

✘ A number of core convictions and foundational assumptions have emerged out of these many years of conversation that long preceded the conversations that gave rise to 2012. And, happily, as we're beginning the process of looking at our next strategic plan—and that process has begun—we need to know where to begin. Where do we begin?

Well, we begin happily—and here there seems to be a very powerful sense of consensus within our community—with those core convictions, with those foundational assumptions. Then, from a very practical sense, from the unifying academic themes that flow out of the foundational assumptions and the core convictions. And the unifying academic themes—there are six—begin with “Because we believe ... .” That is an extraordinary achievement for a university, for any university. It's a towering achievement for a national research university to honor both the discovery dimension of the intellectual life as a scholarly community but also that honors deeply the tradition of caring for the eternal welfare of each and every student and manifested, therefore, by the tradition of great teaching.



Wearing his Baylor Line jersey, Baylor University President Ken Starr welcomes new students to the Waco campus.  
(PHOTO/Robert Rogers/Baylor University)

So, we seem to be at a point in Baylor University's history where there is consensus on the following: One, great teaching is absolutely non-negotiable. For one to be a tenured member of this faculty, one must be a great teacher. Secondly there must be a balance, so that discovery—which we are called upon to do by the Parable of the Talents, we are to use our intellectual gifts to understand more fully God's world, and to seek out a deeper understanding of truth. And that includes, of course, ways of research that help a hurting world. Thus, part of the research activity that makes the entire Baylor community extraordinarily proud is our work in biology and biochemistry that's working to heal people. That's working to help poor people in remote villages of Africa and Asia to live a better life. It's living out the gospel life. It's healing the sick. It's attending to the needs of the needy. This is the kind of academic inquiry that we honor and cherish.

And it's always been a part Baylor life. Research has always been there. Long before I was alive, research was going on—and this I know—at Baylor University. It's a question of balance—as long as we don't in any way compromise the commitment to great teaching and caring about the students.



So, that may have been a concern that I believe experience teaches us that our culture of great teaching and mentoring and caring holistically about the student, including the student's spiritual welfare. We're not going to compromise that. That is non-negotiable—the caring about the student. If you talk to students, as I now do daily, that is one of the reasons they were drawn to this place and why they so love this place. Beginning on Day One with Welcome Week when they move in, they are welcomed with the great spirit of hospitality that—if not uniquely, certainly strongly—characterizes the Baylor experience. And none of that has been the slightest bit compromised by the very spirited conversations that have gone on in the past. Great commitment to caring about that individual student as soon as she arrives on campus.

✘ **So, is the principle of integrating faith and learning or faith and intellectual excellence achievable for Baylor?**

✘ It's time for us to find new ways of expressing a commitment to academic excellence within a Christian community. Even the term "integration of faith and learning" actually comes out of the Reformed tradition. I'm not unfamiliar with some of these traditions by virtue of my involvement in Christian education. It is important for us to enlarge the conversation and to ensure everybody is invited to the metaphorical round table. There have got to be different ways and different disciplines of serving the Master—of being a person who is in the kingdom, seeking to further and foster the purposes of the kingdom. Sometimes, nomenclature can get in the way.

I would like, as best we can, to enjoy what has been true for many, many months now—including under the inspired leadership of (Interim President) David Garland—a sense of community, the achievement of a living embodiment of the Baylor stated mission of a caring community that cares

about everyone. That doesn't mean everybody's going to agree, even on particular methodology and the like. But we have agreement on the basics. And that is, here's our mission: We're a Christian university. We honor our Baptist heritage. We create a caring community. And we seek academic excellence and excellence in all things in that context.

✘ **All of this has been part of the discussion, in part, between the university and its administration and the [Baylor Alumni Association](#). Do you see pathways for restoring that relationship between the university and that one very active part of the Baylor family?**

✘ I have a very warm relationship with the president of the BAA, Emily Tinsley. I know a number of the members of the board. At the same time, there are great challenges in terms of rallying all of our alumni around the university. The single biggest challenge is improving the extent of alumni participation in financial support of the university.

I was chatting with our new Cherry Professor, who hails from Williams College, and he expressed shock that the percentage of alumni giving—not dollars, but percentage—at Baylor University is below double digits, 6.8 percent. He expressed shock: “If there’s such love for this institution, what’s happening?” And I said, “Well, I’m looking into that.”

It couldn't be my initial priority. I had the Big XII and just getting to know folks and thinking about getting a strategic planning process under way, welcoming the students.

But right now for the fall, very high on my agenda is thinking through: “Why is that? Why is the percentage of alumni giving at 6.8 percent?” As I travel around for send-off parties, ... we hug on the students and say, “You’ve got to go to Line Camp and go to Independence and get your Line

Camp jersey” and emphasize and trumpet the great traditions of Baylor University. People are all excited. And the parents all (say): “My grandparents went there. I went there.” And then I come back and see what’s going on here: Six point eight percent giving.

So, that’s very high on my agenda: How can we all, in a spirit of unity and loving the institution—whatever different views might be—find ways we can come alongside the university?

One of the reasons I feel so strongly about that is that we have had this extraordinary growth of programs and the like, but frankly on the backs of the students by raising tuition. And we can’t keep that up. ... That I knew when I came in on June 1, when I looked at the (financial) model: This must stop. This being this kind of tuition increases. We may not be able to do it for a year or two years, but we’ve got to find a totally different model of financing higher education here at Baylor University.

And you know who’s going to help us do that? The alumni—144,000 alumni. So, we’ve got to find that way to bring everybody in to really engaging. I’m very excited about that, and look forward to everybody growing together and staying focused on what we need to stay focused on to build the university.

**✘ Ironically, did the Big XII crisis—which happened your first day on the job—give you hope because everybody in the Baylor family was pulling in the same direction?**

**✘** Amen, and hearty amen again. That was, to draw from Mr. Churchill, “Our finest hour.” If there were any swords, they had all been beaten into plowshares. And then this mighty army of alumni and friends, thanks to social networking, ... . They were there. And so when we called upon the mighty Baylor Nation, small in number, to rise up, it was Gideon’s army.

The nation rose up, and it was a joy to behold. ... We had war rooms for this mighty battle.

But this is part of, it seems to me, why Baylor is unique. We are the only private institution, the largest Baptist university in the world, in the Big XII. We kept talking about the student athletes. Why are we talking about what (women's basketball) Coach Kim Mulkey called "the almighty dollar," when we should be talking about the student athletes and their well-being? Do we want them taking red-eyes from Washington state and Oregon to come back to Central Texas to attend class? And will they be in any condition to be the student we want them to be? Are they going to be falling asleep in chapel because they were on a red-eye two nights before and haven't been able to recover?

That's what (Athletic Director) Ian McCaw, our board of regents, all the university's servant leaders, our coaches were talking about—student athletes. So, others may have been talking about other things. "Judge not that you be not judged." We were talking about student athletes.

We know who we are. We know what's important to us. And because we are Baylor, we talked about the student athletes. That resonated. It was a moral voice; call it a sermon. It was a moral voice that resonated with the Baylor Nation, but more than that, it started resonating with the people of Texas, including the legislators.

**✘ When you were selected, some people were somewhat alarmed because of your background in politics, and others pointed to the diversity you brought to Pepperdine. What will you do at Baylor in terms of campus culture, as well as administrative actions and faculty appointments to encourage diversity—political, philosophical as well as theological viewpoints?**

✘ First, what's the role that I am to play? I view the role as that of an encourager. As I shared with the advisory committee and the search committee, my model in terms of servant leadership is (the New Testament missionary) Barnabas. He was not the head of a nonprofit, but he was an encourager. He was a "son of encouragement." ... So, you tell me, how can I encourage? How can I help?

Well, one of the ways I can encourage is to be energetically engaged. So, I think you will find that at every turn, that as I tried at Pepperdine, I will be energetically engaged in building. I am always trying to do something that is constructive.

That's one of the reasons that if someone wants to engage me in theological debate, I'll say: "I'm ill-equipped to even enter the conversation. Let's talk about building Baylor." If someone says, "Well, what about this issue that's going to come up at the X convention?" I'll say: "I'm sure it will be a lively and productive debate. Let's talk about Baylor and building Baylor."

And so I hope something I can bring is the experience I've had in higher education. While I've had this life in the law, I've always been involved in higher education. I've served on boards of trustees of American University, of Shenandoah University. I've served on boards of visitors of different institutions that have permitted me to come into the company of the leadership of the universities themselves. I've been privileged and blessed to have mentors over the years who are renowned presidents of different universities. So I bring an energetic commitment to encouragement, and that's what I would like to be on the epitaph: "He may not have been very smart. He may not have had a Ph.D. He may not have been a cradle Baptist. But he sure was out there encouraging us at every turn."

That's what I tried to do at Pepperdine University, and that's what I'm trying to do now—making sure that I am energetically engaged to be encouraged and thereby to build.

