

Panel finds defining ‘Baptist university’ no simple task

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DALLAS—The answer to “What is a Baptist university?” is complex and nuanced, according to panelists assembled by the [Baptist History & Heritage Society](#).

They spent the better part of a morning discussing the question, examining it from perspectives of both mission and practice, during the society’s annual meeting at [Dallas Baptist University](#) May 21.

The response to the question “is more about a conversation than it is about an answer,” said Bill Bellinger, chairman of the religion department at [Baylor University](#) in Waco, Texas.

“We seek in our mission to be grounded in Baptist identity as part of a larger community of faith,” Bellinger said, noting Baylor is launching a Baptist research center in part to help identify what terms such as “Baptist identity” and “Baptist tradition” mean.

At Baylor, the religion department is committed to Christian faith and Baptist identity that produces “an informed faith” in students, he said. Teaching and research are conducted “according to rigorous academic standards in a context that is friendly to faith and church.”

Four key factors define a Baptist university, said Sharon Emberton, provost at [East Texas Baptist University](#) in Marshall. “We hope to continue to be the torchbearers, not being afraid to say, ‘Jesus saves,’” she reported. “Scholarship and academic excellence endeavors must be placed on a seamless integration of faith and learning.

“A Baptist university must serve as a beacon ... for training the next generation of leaders and workers. And a contemporary Baptist university must celebrate missional experience—service learning and missions involvement.”

The mission of a Baptist university can be described by key words from the letters of the word “serve,” insisted Fitzgerald Hill, president of [Arkansas Baptist College](#) in Little Rock. They are:

- **Serve.** *“It’s not about me,” he said. “I’m not getting a big salary. That’s all right; we’re saving lives.”*
- **Energize the situation.** *“We have to bring energy to our students every day.”*
- **Respond.** *“We can be known for the problems we create, the problems we solve or the problems we do nothing about,” Hill said, noting the historically black school actively seeks to respond to the problems faced by its students, many of whom come from poverty and difficult situations.*
- **Vision.** *Too many Americans focus on themselves, but a Baptist university should help students see the needs and opportunities of the world around them, he said.*
- **Empower.** *“He (God) empowers our situation, so we can be a light like him in a very dark place,” Hill concluded.*

“‘Baptistness’ (of a university) is not defined by curriculum or control, but by cooperation in the community and the world,” stressed Sheila Klopfer, professor of religion at [Georgetown College](#) in Georgetown, Ky.

Since its foundation in 1829, Georgetown has embraced its mission “to remain rooted in Baptist life while open to a Christian non-sectarian tradition,” she said. That heritage served the school well in 2005, when the

college and the [Kentucky Baptist Convention](#) parted amicably, she added, noting Georgetown has created strategic alliances with at least eight other Baptist organizations.

The Baptist practices of a university first must be congruent with its identity as a university, then as a Christian university and finally as a Baptist Christian university, maintained Loyd Allen, professor of church history and spiritual formation at Mercer University's [McAfee School of Theology](#) in Atlanta.

Those Baptist practices should honor freedom, support individual choices and enable each person to obey conscience, and point outward to lead members of the university community to serve others, Allen said.

A Baptist university's practices should include involving Baptists as trustees, administrators, faculty and students, and maintaining a Christianity department that "comes out of the Baptist tradition," he said. A Baptist university also should provide scholarships and missions opportunities for Baptist students, integrate academic life and spiritual practice in a Baptist tradition that includes worship and service, and "tell the Baptist story often."

The quality, commitment and perspective of faculty play a huge role in forming a Baptist university, said Brad Creed, provost at [Samford University](#).

Noting his most important task is hiring faculty, Creed reported he spends a great deal of time talking with prospective teachers about community. They serve students out of "a common commitment, sharing a common purpose, with common effort on common ground in a community to which they willingly belong," he said.

Most Samford faculty are Christians, although a few are Jews who were attracted to the Baptist school because of its values, treatment of students

and purpose, he said.

The key to a university's identity is "getting the right people to be part of your team," Creed stressed. "It's not curriculum. The right people will develop the right curriculum."

Dallas Baptist University reflects President Gary Cook's deep respect for Texas Baptists and possesses institutional gratitude to Texas Baptists for saving the school when it faced financial ruin, Provost Gail Linam said.

All of DBU's trustees are Baptists, as are most faculty and staff, she added, noting all new faculty and staff are taught the Baptist story. DBU also engages with the Baptist World Alliance and the Baptist General Convention of Texas, teaches freshmen about Baptist distinctives, provides church-matched grants and scholarships to Baptist students, and involves students in missions training and activity.

"We would not be here if not for the Baptist family," Linam observed.

The practice of a Baptist university reflects the essence of Christ, said Mark Tew, provost at [Howard Payne University](#) in Brownwood, Texas. "What we do as educators is incarnational. We incarnate God just as Jesus did," he insisted. "We need to recognize relational issues as opposed to definitional issues. When we do that, we've got the possibility of being Christ to those students."

Universities have been entrusted with students and will be held accountable for what they do with them, he said. As long as Baptist educators see their task as reflecting the presence of Christ into students' lives, "it's possible to do some truly remarkable things in Christian higher education."