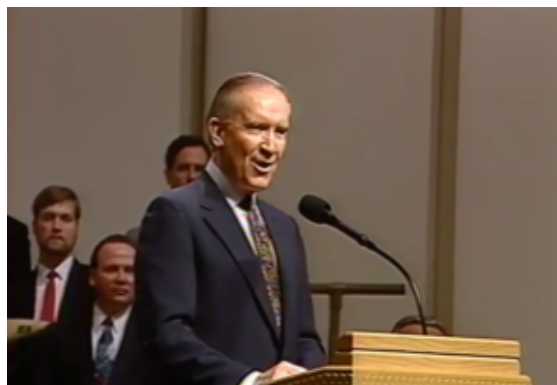


Russell Dilday, Baptist statesman, dead at 92

June 21, 2023

Russell H. Dilday, whose tenure as president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, in Fort Worth saw the school's endowment more than double while leading the seminary to its greatest period of growth but who was fired in 1994 by fundamentalists controlling the board of trustees, died June 21. He was 92.



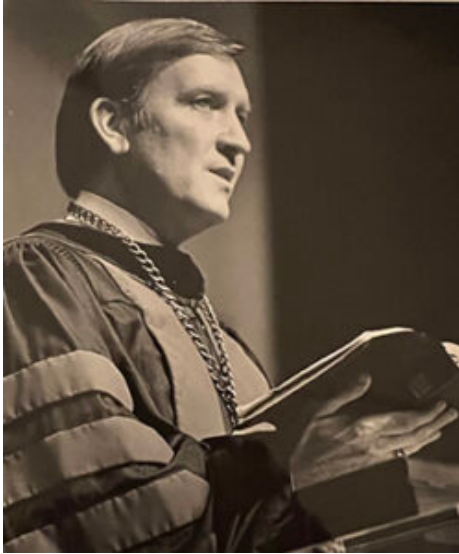
Russell H. Dilday delivered the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary Founders Day address in 1993. (Screen capture image)

Dilday had been in failing health the past two years, according to his daughter, Nancy Dilday Duck. He was living in Dallas at Ventana by Buckner senior living community.

“Daddy never lost his wonderful sense of humor and his heart for ministry,” his family said in a statement. “Everyone around him loved and admired him. We are sad to lose him, but we are grateful for his amazing life and all he did for the kingdom of God. We have lost a wonderful father and

Baptists have lost a great leader.”

Man of ‘character’ and ‘integrity’



Russell H. Dilday addresses graduates during a Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary commencement. (Courtesy Photo)

Dilday served as president of Southwestern Seminary from 1978 to 1994. During his tenure, the school became the largest theological seminary in the world and was responsible for training more than half of all Southern Baptist missionaries at the time.

His time as president of the school was marked by ongoing battles with a fundamentalist board during the height of Southern Baptists’ political struggles for control of the nation’s largest non-Catholic denomination.

Toby Druin, former editor of the *Baptist Standard*, remembered Dilday’s

grace in the face of difficult times for Southwestern and Southern Baptists.

“Russell Dilday was the epitome of a Christian leader and statesman and a staunch defender of Baptist principles. He was outspoken in his defense of the authority of the Bible,” Druin said. “He was president of Southwestern Seminary during its greatest years.

“I will always remember him for his character and integrity and his friendship toward *The Baptist Standard*,” Druin said.

After his firing March 9, 1994, Dilday served as president of the Baptist General Convention of Texas and in leadership roles at two other BGCT-affiliated schools. He was a retired distinguished professor of homiletics at Truett Theological Seminary and special assistant to the president of Baylor University.

In 2002, he served as interim president of Howard Payne University in Brownwood, and he was instrumental in the founding of the B.H. Carroll Theological Institute, serving as its first chancellor.

William M. Pinson Jr., BGCT executive director emeritus, described Dilday as “a wonderful friend” and a “deeply dedicated follower of Jesus.”

“He greatly loved and was devoted to his personal family and his Baptist family,” Pinson said. “Brilliant with a strong sense of humor, he was willing to tackle challenging, controversial circumstances. His faith in Christ and courage, coupled with the support of his wife and family, enabled him to serve steadfastly during turbulent times in Baptist life.”

In addition to his service in institutional and denominational life, Dilday was the founding pastor of Tallowood Baptist Church in Houston and pastor of Second Ponce de Leon Baptist Church in Atlanta, along with churches in Antelope and Clifton. He also served several churches as interim pastor.

Throughout his career, Dilday was a prolific author, writing numerous articles and books, including his highly regarded commentary on 1 and 2 Kings for *The Preacher's Commentary* series. In addition, he contributed to numerous books and anthologies.

'Higher Ground'

Known as one of the Southern Baptist Convention's leading statesmen during his career, Dilday was only the second president of an SBC seminary to preach the convention's annual sermon in 1984, following in the footsteps of E.Y. Mullins, who was the subject of Dilday's doctoral dissertation.

That sermon in Kansas City, Mo., put him in the crosshairs of fundamentalist leaders of the convention. Titled "[Higher Ground](#)," Dilday called on Southern Baptists to put aside denominational politics and power struggles and aspire to a higher standard.



Russell Dilday enjoys time with children at the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary Child Care Center. (Courtesy Photo)

"Stay on the heights, Southern Baptists," he urged messengers. "You're

doing a great work. Stay close to the Lord and to the task he has called you to perform. Be faithful to your historic heritage. Don't dabble in controversies or exhaust your energies arm-wrestling for denominational control. Stay on the higher ground of spiritual persuasion, autonomous individualism, (and) the Christ-like humility where you belong."

In 2007, Dilday released a book titled *Higher Ground: A Call for Christianity Civility*, in which he called for Baptists "to move beyond the lowlands of caustic controversy to the higher ground of Christianity civility."

His firing from Southwestern Seminary sent shockwaves through the SBC. A photo of the locks on his office being changed circulated through Baptist state papers and brought a torrent of criticism on trustees. Media outlets from across the country covered the story.

Dilday later recalled a rally of students outside his home the day after the firing. "Betty and I led them in singing 'Open our eyes, Lord, we want to see you.' I will always remember that moment. It was a moment that said to them and to us: 'God is at work in all things for good. God can bring good out of evil. God's way is to leave the past behind and focus on Jesus.'"

"The grace with which Dr. Dilday handled his firing amazes me to this day," said Alan Lefever, Baptist historian and director of the Texas Baptist Historical Collection. "There was no desire for revenge, no bitterness at being unjustly dismissed, only a conviction to follow God's call.

"I believe history will remember Russell Dilday in the same way we recall George Truett or R.C. Buckner. He was a man of grace, charity, and conviction. We should all seek to emulate his example."

Dr. Dilday's 2004 book *Columns: Glimpses of a Seminary Under Assault*, gives a detailed account of events leading up to his dismissal.

“My disagreement (with SBC fundamentalists) was always aimed at the fundamentalist spirit, the secular political methodology of the takeover party and their disregard for authentic Baptist principles,” he wrote.

Todd Still, dean of Truett Seminary where Dr. Dilday served after his firing at Southwestern, called him “an unusually gifted preacher, administrator, and leader. Dr. Dilday helped to light the way for innumerable students, myself included, as well as for congregations, institutions, and a denomination for years on end.”

Still added, “I am, and we are, diminished by his death even as we were blessed by his life. He will always be the standard of a Christian gentleman and scholar.”

Native Texan and minister’s son

A native Texan, Dilday grew up in a Texas Baptist minister’s home. His father, Hooper Dilday, served a number of Texas churches, and was on the staff of the BGCT 20 years in Sunday school, discipleship training and church services, and was longtime minister of education at First Baptist Church in Wichita Falls.



Russell H. Dilday is ordained to the gospel ministry. His father, Hooper

Dilday, presents his son the certificate of ordination. (Photo courtesy of the Dilday family)

His mother Opal Spillers Dilday was born in Memphis, Texas, and was a children's educational specialist in Baptist churches in Amarillo, Port Arthur, Port Neches, Wichita Falls and Dallas.

Russell Hooper Dilday was born Sept. 30, 1930, in Amarillo. He was the older of three brothers and a sister born to Hooper and Opal Dilday. He earned his bachelor's degree from Baylor University, where he met his wife Betty, who died in 2018. The couple first met in a Bible class at Baylor University and were married 66 years.

He earned his Master of Divinity and his Doctor of Philosophy degrees from Southwestern Seminary.

Dilday was preceded in death by his wife Betty, a younger brother, Don Dilday, and son Robert Dilday. Survivors include his two daughters, Nancy Duck and husband Nolan, and Ellen Garrett and husband Shannon, along with six grandchildren, six great-grandchildren, and numerous nieces and nephews. He is also survived by his sister Ann Young and her husband Mack, along with a brother Jim Dilday.

The family has requested memorials be made to the Russell H. Dilday Chair in Baptist Life and Leadership at Baylor University's George W. Truett Theological Seminary by contacting Jon Sisk at jon_sisk@baylor.edu or calling 254-715-6124. A memorial service is planned for Saturday, July 8 at 10 a.m. at Park Cities Baptist Church in Dallas.