

Editorial: A quarter-century after the SBC holy war

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This past week marked the 25th anniversary of the final battle in the Southern Baptist holy war. The former combatants noted the occasion appropriately: They got on with current business.

The Southern Baptist Convention conducted its [annual meeting](#) in Columbus, Ohio. And the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship held its [general assembly](#) in Dallas.



Editor Marv Knox Of course, not every former combatant gathered in Columbus or in Dallas. Many, if they noticed at all, looked down from heaven. Wouldn't you be interested to know how they're getting along now? Wouldn't you be fascinated to know who among them were surprised to see their adversaries inside the Pearly Gates?

And many participants in this year's meetings never joined the old battle. They weren't old enough.

But in June 1990, New Orleans' Superdome hosted 38,745 messengers who converged to determine the SBC's fate. By then, the convention conflict had raged 11 years. Across that span, the conservatives* won every presidential election. Their victories allowed them to control the nominating process, which enabled them to stack all the convention's

agencies with like-minded trustees.

(*The names of the SBC's warring groups remain sensitive after all these years. Both groups claimed they were "conservative." Adversaries called the group on the right "fundamentalist," but it staked out the "conservative" banner. Foes labeled the group on the left "liberal," and it settled for "moderate.")

Control hinged on one vote

In the summer of '90, both sides knew convention control hinged on one more presidential vote. They put up popular pastors in an open election. If the conservatives' standard-bearer, Morris Chapman of First Baptist Church in Wichita Falls, could win, the balance of power soon would tilt in their favor on all the convention's trustee boards.

The moderates backed Texas native Daniel Vestal of Dunwoody Baptist Church in suburban Atlanta. Vestal seemed a perfect foil to counter the conservatives' assertion moderates were liberal and unconcerned about lost souls. Vestal, a former teen evangelist, was theologically conservative, a "personal soul-winner" and a successful pastor.

Chapman—widely considered the most beatable candidate in the conservatives' stable—trounced Vestal, 58 percent to 42 percent.

The moderates' exodus

Thousands of moderates left New Orleans and never attended another SBC annual meeting. They figured if a Vestal couldn't beat a Chapman, then they couldn't regain control of the convention.

SBC skirmishes continued for several years. But by 1993, the new conservative majority on the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary board replaced retiring President Roy Honeycutt with one from their own camp. A

year later, conservative trustees at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary fired President Russell Dilday. Even reality-deniers who had buried their heads for 15 years admitted the gig was up. The conservatives totally controlled the SBC.

But back to 1990: Two months after the pivotal New Orleans session, 3,000 moderates gathered in Atlanta for a “Consultation of Concerned Baptists.” That meeting launched a process that resulted in formation of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship the next year.

A quarter-century later, little has changed and practically everything has changed.

Ronnie Floyd, a young buck in the 1980s conservative brigade, is serving his second term as SBC president. And Southern Baptists still are fighting the culture wars that helped ignite the battles of a generation ago. The pending Supreme Court ruling on gay marriage dominated the minds of SBC messengers this summer in Columbus.

At the CBF, the vanquished veterans of the SBC battles still provide much financial and church support. CBF recently implemented a sleek reorganization. But sometimes, the shadow of the SBC still falls across Fellowshipippers’ faces, and a look of what-will-we-be-when-we-grow-up flashes in their eyes.

A new generation

But consider this: The SBC and CBF torches are being passed to a new generation.

The SBC’s mission leader, David Platt of the International Mission Board, was born a month after the SBC holy war began. His counterpart, CBF Global Missions’ Steven Porter, was still in high school when it ended in 1990.

The SBC's immediate past president and first African-American leader, Fred Luter, spent the holy war years resurrecting a congregation in inner-city New Orleans, far from the conservatives' loops of power. The CBF's moderator, Kasey Jones, also an African-American, was growing up in rural California, at least a half-continent and a generation or two removed from the fray. Its incoming moderator, Matt Cook, was a sophomore in college in 1990.

Ironically, all these years later, the SBC and CBF find themselves facing many of the same problems.

From the 1950s through the '80s, moderate and conservative Southern Baptists alike rode a giant demographic wave. In the early years, they birthed babies to beat the band, and they baptized those children in elementary school. So, they grew, just as their families grew.

The moderate leadership envisioned Bold Mission Thrust, a campaign to evangelize the whole world by the year 2000. But conservatives complained the moderates didn't believe the Bible enough and weren't evangelistic enough. They triumphantly predicted God would honor their purity and propel their passion, so that, when they were in charge, the SBC would skyrocket.

Well, it didn't happen.

Decline

Even the [SBC's own agencies](#) acknowledge the convention has been in decline at least since 2009. From 2013 to 2014, the SBC lost almost a quarter-million members, baptisms declined by 1.63 percent and attendance fell 2.75 percent.

Moderates in the CBF may be tempted to enjoy some old-fashioned [schadenfreude](#), but they've got challenges of their own. (Besides, it's not

sweet-spirited to relish the pain of others.) CBF doesn't possess the SBC's data-gathering system, so membership, baptism and attendance comparisons are harder to come by. But CBF is struggling to maintain the interest of a critical mass of congregations. And funding its plethora of partner ministries is formidable in an era when churches mirror our highly customizable, pick-and-choose culture.

Both groups also face new possibilities for division. The SBC has been struggling to keep tension between its Calvinist and modified Arminian factions under control. And the U.S. Supreme Court's gay-marriage decision could exacerbate friction between CBF congregations who will loathe and welcome the outcome.

Occasionally, you'll hear someone say they wish the SBC and CBF would get back together. That's like saying you hope a divorced couple who have married other people and born children by their new spouses would remarry. It's not going to happen. They have their own commitments and dependents now.

God's kingdom big enough for both

But hard as it may be for old holy warriors to believe, the kingdom of God is big enough for the Southern Baptist Convention and Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. In fact, the kingdom needs both groups. The particular brand of Christianity expressed by each attracts unique subsets of people. Their perspectives and emphases contribute to the richness and variety of American Christianity.

The Southern Baptist holy war has been over for a quarter-century. God bless the SBC and CBF. May they find their way—and Jesus' way—in a post-denominational era framed by a secular society.