

# Editorial: Are Texas Baptists who we say we are?

February 21, 2024

Texas is pretty proud of itself. Texas Baptists are pretty proud of themselves, too. But are we who we say we are?

“As Texas, we like to brag about how big we are, but this is not about bragging. It’s about being aware of the blessing God has given us,” Julio Guarneri, Baptist General Convention of Texas executive director, said during [his first report](#) to the BGCT Executive Board Feb. 19.

As someone who has heard and responded to Texas braggadocio since I arrived in this state more than 30 years ago, it was refreshing to me to hear Guarneri call it out in McAllen during his 2023 annual meeting address and then again in his comments to the Executive Board this week.

Guarneri was speaking about the size, strength, reach and influence of the Baptist General Convention of Texas. The BGCT’s size, strength, reach and influence is significant and has been for many years. It’s hard not to slip from celebration of that into pride in it when recounting all the good ministry the BGCT has done and is doing still.

But, as Guarneri has pointed out, Texas Baptists are not tasked with pursuing bragging rights. They are tasked with what Guarneri called the “main thing”—being disciples of Jesus who make disciples of Jesus.

Besides, when people settle into bragging, they often become last year’s champions. They become complacent. They rest in their past achievements. They abdicate their responsibility in favor of measuring themselves against others. They conflate who they are with who they were.

Guarneri did not ask if we are who we say we are, but I am asking that question. The challenges ahead—and there are plenty—won't be met with bragging. They will be met by us being who we are called by God to be and doing what we are called by God to do.

## **A reflection on how we appear**

When we focus on our past accomplishments, we don't give adequate attention to the present. And when we neglect the present, we can slip away from who we say we are, and not perceive the slip.

A woman expected to find a much different situation when she arrived in the Bible Belt. She recently moved to the Dallas-Fort Worth area from the Pacific Northwest and thought people would be much more religious here. Our reputation for religion is far-reaching.

In a conversation with my wife, the woman said she was surprised to find the people here less religious than Christians in the Pacific Northwest. In her estimation, Christians are more serious about their religion in the Northwest than they seem to be in North Texas.

We can quibble over the details of what she means by "religious," how she's measuring religiousness and where she's measuring it. But it all amounts to the same thing—a dodge. We think we're pretty good Christians and don't cotton to outsiders saying any different—even if those outsiders are right.

But "outsiders" often see things we've grown blind to. We see the present through the haze of the past. They see our cataracts.

What she described echoes something Jesus said: "Woe to you, [churchgoers and nominal Christians]! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead

men's bones and all uncleanness" (Matthew 23:27).

I know Jesus wasn't addressing churchgoers and nominal Christians. He was addressing the scribes and the Pharisees—the religious leaders who should know better. But not being a pastor, Sunday school teacher or other religious leader ourselves doesn't make it OK for us to be "clean on the outside" yet "full of greed and self-indulgence" on the inside (Matthew 23:25).

The woman expected to find people in Texas whose lives matched their reputations. She found something less instead.

Are we who we say we are?

## **I'm not *that* bad**

I can hear the critics accusing me and her of a sweeping generalization. Not all Christians are hypocrites, they will want to make clear. Texas Baptists are serious followers of Jesus Christ. If she'd had more encounters with us, she would have found the religious people she expected to find, some might say, defensively.

My response to this anticipated criticism is the same as my response to quibbling about her definition of "religious." It's a dodge. To say not all Christians are hypocrites is a true statement. But is it true of us?

I am not calling individual Texas Baptists into question. I am not accusing individual Texas Baptists of hypocrisy. I am not calling you a hypocrite. I am calling us to self-examination, because those of us who call ourselves Texas Baptists represent someone far greater than Texas Baptists. We represent Jesus Christ.

For that reason alone, we must be who we say we are if we claim Christ's name as our identity.

Those who identify as Christian make the claim—intended or not—that their primary and ultimate allegiance is to Jesus Christ, that his will is their own and supersedes their will. And Jesus’ will is, as Guarneri said, that we be about the “main thing” of being disciples of Jesus who make disciples of Jesus.

How easily we who are religious—yea, even we Texas Baptists—subordinate the “main thing” to secondary, tertiary or lower things, such as religious tests and political allegiances, baptizing the subordination in purity language.

I applaud Guarneri’s call to Texas Baptists to keep our eyes on the “main thing”—being disciples of Jesus who make disciples of Jesus. And I know his charge is pointed at me as much as anyone.

## **Am I who I say I am?**

In a world whose values always have been at odds with Jesus’, it is imperative that we know who we are and whose we are, that we see clearly how we appear, and that we be who we say we are. We who identify with Christ must match our lives to our identification.

If Texas Baptists are going to be who we say we are, I must be who I say I am.

On Feb. 19, I proudly was amening in my heart Guarneri’s charge against Texas bragging. “You tell ’em,” rang my internal applause.

On Feb. 21, the chill set in as I asked myself, “Am I who I say I am?”

In and by Christ’s grace, I can be. And so can you.

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