

EDITORIAL: So different & so much in common

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Lovers of irony should relish the fact that—in alphabetical order—the Baptist General Convention of Texas, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and Southern Baptist Convention have a lot in common these days.

They're all struggling with membership issues. They're all strapped for cash. They're all scrambling to figure out what to do about the future.

Editor Marv Knox

A generation ago (my, how time flies) the “conservative resurgence” purged the [Southern Baptists](#) of so-called moderates, who had been libeled as “liberals” and branded the source of all woes. The new SBC leaders advocated theological purity and predicted God would pour unprecedented blessings upon their convention once it attained homogenous orthodoxy. They got their purity, but the blessings did not flow. Their quest for theological correctness morphed into political infighting between generations, personalities and quadrants of conservatism. Contrary to accepted wisdom, even baptisms declined.

Baptists who migrated to the [Fellowship](#) faced their own challenges. Put out by the SBC, they wanted to be different. They successfully resisted the SBC's trend toward autocratic leadership. But they so wanted to be different they denied their desire to be a new convention even while aspiring for convention-like structures, such as a unified budget, affiliated missions and ministries, and an archipelago of institutions. Almost 20 years later, they struggle with how to attract adherents and to fund and operate an un-convention.

[Texas Baptists](#), meanwhile, planted feet in both worlds. Some love the SBC,

while others adore the CBF. They often distrust each other because of those affections. Long-term disagreement over how to relate nationally dissipated BGCT support, particularly among the most conservative churches, which left to start a competing convention. On top of that, seemingly ceaseless strife, a church-starting scandal and the shifting focus of generations provided excuses and/or reasons for traditionally faithful Texas Baptist supporters to drift away—toward quasi-independence and project-specific relationships with like-minded churches and laser-focused, church-friendly institutional ministries.

So, all three Baptist behemoths simultaneously and ironically abandoned their first love. All would say Christ is their first love. But each group fixed its primary focus elsewhere. Southern Baptists honed in on rigid orthodoxy. Fellowship Baptists longed for a new denominational home. And Texas Baptists—ever the champions of autonomy—got so caught up in options and possibilities that we made an idol of choices and lost our center of gravity.

These Baptist groups face three consuming challenges:

- **Relevance.** *Most laypeople—particularly young adults—are ignorant and apathetic regarding all things denominational. They don't know, and they don't care. Also, more pastors who historically have been engaged are slipping away. They appropriately ask: How does supporting you fulfill our mission better than we could do on our own or with an assortment of other partners? Why should we give significant sums to you to demonstrate our identification as Baptists? What return do we really get on our investment?*

- **Alternatives.** *Churches of all stripes, from fundamentalist, to conservative, to moderate, to progressive, to liberal, can choose from a vast array of options for everything from Bible study curriculum, to worship materials, to—and this is key—missions and ministry partnership opportunities. Baptist churches no longer must choose from one domestic*

and one international ministry option, one publishing house, one advocacy group, one decidedly similar set of seminaries.

- **Mission/vision.** *Decades of denominational discord distracted leaders of all three groups. They remained preoccupied with one another, expending energy on internecine competition rather than focusing on the satanic enemies of evil and unbelief. They got behind on learning how to communicate the changeless gospel to an ever-changing culture. And now they're all struggling to catch up.*

Who knew all these disparate Baptists would have so much in common?

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