

# Opinion: Truth and the Baptist Holy War — casualties

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(ABP) — “Truth is the first casualty of war,” the old adage proclaims. Consequently, a couple of truth-tellers became early victims of the Baptist Holy War.

Twenty years ago this summer, the Southern Baptist Convention’s so-called “Conservative Resurgence” secured absolute political victory and started to pile up strong majorities on all SBC trustee boards.

Shortly thereafter — on July 17, 1990 — the SBC Executive Committee retraced the template of victorious coup-plotters throughout history. They took control of the media.

Editor Marv Knox

In this case, they fired the editors of Baptist Press, the convention’s then-respected news service. Al Shackleford and Dan Martin were experienced professionals, convictionally and viscerally committed to telling the truth as best they could discover it. Shackleford and Martin lost their jobs because they believed Southern Baptists deserved fair, thorough, even-handed reports on the events and issues that shaped the convention.

The action took place behind closed doors in a room protected by armed guards. I know; I was there. I saw the guns carried by two off-duty Nashville police officers who “protected” the Executive Committee from about 300 heartbroken Southern Baptists. The protesters stood outside the room, singing “Amazing Grace” and “It Is Well With My Soul” with tears streaming down their faces.

My own grief sprang from wells of personal relationship, professional

conviction and commitment to principles.

Al and Dan were dear friends. Until six weeks earlier, I had worked alongside them at Baptist Press. I knew they cared deeply for Baptist principles of truth-telling and honesty. Against pressure from every side, they served all Baptists fairly without fear or favor. I worried for them, for their futures and for their families.

As a Baptist journalist, I shook from the violence done to a long-standing principle: “Tell the truth, and trust the people.” The new SBC leaders fired Shackleford and Martin because the new leaders wanted to control the news in order to control Baptists. They desecrated the callings not only of these two journalists, but scores of colleagues who sensed God appointed them to serve their denomination by informing its people.

Their actions also defied Baptists’ commitment to the twin principles of soul competency and the priesthood of all believers. For almost 400 years, Baptists sacrificed and bled for those convictions. But by undermining the conduit of truth, the Executive Committee declared individual Baptist souls incompetent to handle truth.

That day remains one of Baptists’ darkest. The ignobility of the Executive Committee’s action marked a terminus of trust for many Southern Baptists. If this was what the SBC had become — a political machine that fires faithful employees for following God’s guidance and their consciences — then it wasn’t their convention anymore.

Fortunately, time has healed most wounds inflicted on July 17, 1990. I doubt many, if any, Baptists will weep now for what they lost then. But this anniversary of the Shackleford/Martin firing provides occasion for observation:

- **Political martyrs remained faithful.** Although they suffered, the fired journalists maintained their gracious spirits and sense of divine calling.

Shackleford stocked groceries for a while. Eventually, he served as editor of *Mature Living* magazine, thanks to the kindness of then-Sunday School Board President Jimmy Draper. Shackleford died in an automobile accident in 2000.

Martin held several jobs, including pastor and part-time college instructor in North Carolina, director of Texans Against Gambling, and news writer for the Baptist General Convention of Texas. He now is semi-retired and serves as an intentional interim of churches in Texas and encourager to folks tried by life's stresses.

- **Beauty bloomed from ashes.** On the very day of the editors' firing, a forward-thinking group of Baptists launched Associated Baptist Press, an independent news organization that is even freer than BP was when the SBC still cherished press freedom. From the beginning, ABP was operated by an autonomous board of directors. No political apparatus can control the selection of ABP's board the way Conservative Resurgence operatives controlled the Executive Committee and took over BP.

Similarly, even though the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship initially provided significant ABP funding, the money never came with strings. The Fellowship never even suggested, must less elected, board members. In time, ABP's funding sources became increasingly diverse. If its financial backers have a common denominator, it's their conviction that the only authentic press is a free press.

And so ABP's goal never has been expediency, but rather broad, complete, balanced coverage of news important to all kinds of Baptists. I've been a member of ABP's board for 19 years out of gratitude for the valuable service it has provided to the two Baptist newspapers I have edited.

- **The constant is change.** During the past two decades, both the communications industry and the denomination have been reshaped by

ongoing, churning change. News organizations — from daily newspapers to denominational journals — have been wracked by declining readership. All have been hit hard, and some have not survived. And the way they deliver news seems to be changing by the week. Twenty years ago, Americans read newspapers delivered to them each morning. Now, they might visit a newspaper's website. But more probably, they follow their favorite blogs and tweets, and they click on links sent by friends via Facebook. The pace of change has taxed denominational newspapers to their limits in terms of staffing and funding.

Simultaneously, news about any denomination has been a declining commodity. That's because fewer people care about denominations. And those who still care don't care as passionately as they cared two decades ago. So, selling Baptist news — and even giving it away — has become an increasingly difficult job. If people don't care about the denomination, they're not going to be interested in its news.

- **The principle still matters.** A free flow of news remains vital for any democracy, and Baptist polity is the purest form of democracy. People who cooperate at any level need reliable information so they can respond to challenges and opportunities, make good decisions and work together effectively. If news organizations ceased to exist, Baptists would start new ones, because they need information.

Fortunately, Associated Baptist Press and its New Voice Media partners — the *Baptist Standard*, [\*Religious Herald\*](#) and [\*Word & Way\*](#) — today collaborate in ways that would have been unthinkable 20 years ago. The result is interesting, broad-based, focused journalism — and four stronger news organizations, which may be the template for collaborative denominational journalism in the decades ahead.

Ironically, at least one thing hasn't changed. This summer, the SBC held its most significant annual meeting in, you guessed it, 20 years. A new regime

leads the convention. And members of its retinue are thinking about how they can take over Baptist Press.

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