

# Editorial: What is independent journalism?

September 12, 2019

As we seek to learn from *Baptist Standard* readers around Texas, we are holding listening sessions to hear and respond to questions, concerns and comments about the *Standard*. During the session in San Antonio, I was asked how the *Standard* maintains its independence.

This is an excellent question. Many of our readers have the same concern. As you might expect, so do the board and staff of the Baptist Standard Publishing Company.

To answer the question well, however, I need to do what I didn't do yesterday. I need to ask a preliminary question: What is independent journalism?

If we don't know what independence means in relation to journalism, we will find independence hard to maintain.

## Defining independence

What I think many people mean when they talk about independent journalism is, "Will you be able to say what needs to be said when you need to say it?"

Notice, the ability to say what needs to be said is not the same as the willingness to say what needs to be said. Some journalists are able but unwilling, while others are willing but unable. We praise the courage of the latter and all too often take for granted the freedom of the former.

Does the *Baptist Standard* have the freedom to say what needs to be said

when it needs to be said? Yes.

The next question is, “How?”

I hear in this question a desire to know if the *Baptist Standard* is free of outside influences—organizational, financial or otherwise.

Organizationally, the Baptist Standard Publishing Company is a 501(c)3 nonprofit corporation [independently related](#) to the Baptist General Convention of Texas. As such, the BGCT does not exercise editorial control over our publications.

Financially, we are not subsidized by any state convention. We do not directly receive [Cooperative Program funds](#) from the BGCT, as stated on page 12 of the Texas Baptists 2018 Cooperative Program Annual Report. Our funding comes from ad sales, subscriptions, donations, grants for special projects and an endowment.

Otherwise? That’s a broad category, and the truth is, the *Standard* is as influenced by being in this world as all of us are.

## Contextualizing independence

The reality is our independence is not without limits. Our independence meets its limits where our accountability begins. In this way, we are interdependent.

Our certificate of formation reads: “The purpose for which this corporation is formed is the operation of a communications organization, using a variety of technologies to support, inform, and resource the Baptist General Convention of Texas, churches, and faith-based institutions that serve the broader Christian community, and individual people of faith.”

From this, we understand we are accountable to the people, churches and

institutions of the BGCT. We exist in relationship to the BGCT.

Understand, however, that such accountability does not preclude courage, for our primary accountability is to the Lord Jesus Christ, who frequently spoke discomfiting words.

## Courage and independence

While the *Standard* is free to say what needs to be said when it needs to be said, the obvious question seems to be, “Are we willing to say what needs to be said when it needs to be said?” In other words, do we have courage?

From what I’ve read in the *Standard* and feedback I’ve received in my time as editor, I don’t think the *Standard* has lacked for courage. Editors of the *Standard* regularly have exhibited courage to say what they thought needed to be said when they thought it needed to be said.

Notice, saying what one thinks needs to be said is not the same as saying what others think needs to be said. This gets to a different level of independence: individual versus organizational independence.

Some journalists say what we think others need to hear, while other journalists say what we don’t want to hear. We praise the prophetic gifts of the former and condemn the perturbing tendencies of the latter.

Any courage the *Standard* has is rooted in our primary accountability to Jesus Christ and our commitment to his redeeming and reconciling work. If that work requires news and opinion that unsettles, we will publish it if it is factually true and fairly stated.

Emanating from our primary accountability and commitment to Jesus Christ is our commitment to historic Baptist principles, including soul competency and religious liberty—two freedoms as important for the individual as they are for the collective. Safeguarding the editorial

independence of the Baptist Standard Publishing Company is a crucial expression of our core beliefs as Baptist Christians.

### **Answering the question**

I should get back to answering the question.

How do we maintain our independence?

The question is only five words, but five significant words because of their relationship to one another.

We maintain independence the way all of us do—in the ongoing push and pull of relationship.

*Eric Black is the executive director, publisher and editor of the Baptist Standard. He can be reached at [eric.black@baptiststandard.com](mailto:eric.black@baptiststandard.com) or on Twitter at [@EricBlackBSP](https://twitter.com/EricBlackBSP). The views expressed are those solely of the author.*