

# Editorial: Where do centrist Baptists belong?

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[Travis Collins](#), pastor of First Baptist in Huntsville, Ala. raised the question last week. In response, [Mitch Randall](#), executive director of Ethics Daily, championed the CBF as a home for centrist Baptists. Both articles are worth a read.

Not all who might identify as centrist see the CBF the same way Randall does, which is not a criticism of Randall's position but is a statement based on my own observations. Over the last several years, I've heard many, who identify themselves between the poles in Baptist life, asking some version of: "Where do centrist Baptists belong?"

They no longer feel completely comfortable among very conservative Baptists. They don't agree with some of the theological positions of progressive Baptists. They want to continue to hold the space between the poles, while feeling pressure to move one way or the other.

One of the reasons I've heard the question asked so many times is because I've been on a similar search for about 30 years.

## Finding my place in Baptist life

I grew up under the illusion that Baptists were one big happy family. At least, that's what I thought as a young child. My exposure to the real state of affairs happened at the Southern Baptist Convention in San Antonio in 1988. I was in seventh grade, and I was appalled at how I saw adults, Christian adults, treating one another.

While a student at Hardin-Simmons University, I learned about Baptists from Jesse Fletcher. I'll never forget him relating how Moderate Baptists were described to him: "The only thing down the middle of the road is a yellow stripe."

It was during that class that I met and attempted to interview Bill Bruster for a paper I wrote on the Cooperative Program. I write "attempted" with a smile because Bruster was a very passionate evangelist for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in the mid-1990s.

I knew I resonated with Jesse Fletcher's brand of Baptist more than the sort I witnessed in San Antonio, even if his brand of Baptist was described as yellow.

After graduating from HSU, my wife and I ended up at Southwestern Seminary for reasons more complicated than this editorial will discuss. By that time in my life, I thought of Southwestern as a fundamentalist institution. I didn't identify as a fundamentalist Baptist and learned I wasn't alone at Southwestern.

After graduating from Southwestern, my wife and I ended up as Mission Service Corps missionaries—also for reasons more complicated than this editorial will discuss. We were tasked with raising our entire operating budget. A leader in the CBF encouraged us to consider Global Service Corps. We called the GSC office and learned the CBF system was identical to the MSC system. Not wanting to rebuild our support from scratch, we opted to stay with MSC, and therefore the North American Mission Board. Our motives were more pragmatic than noble.

Falling under the NAMB umbrella was never a great fit for us, but it was where we believed God led us. We did not and do not ascribe to the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message and wondered when MSC missionaries would be expected to do so. During those years, we were strongly discouraged from

associating with anyone in the CBF.

Following our years as MSC missionaries, I served as a youth pastor and associate pastor of a Baptist church in Virginia. The church was examining whether to align with the CBF or to maintain its historic SBC connection. The church was unusual in its local Baptist association because the church ordained women deacons, while its association was aligned almost exclusively with the Southern Baptist Conservatives of Virginia, who disagreed with the ordination of women. As I remember it, I was not there when the church finally made its decision.

From Virginia, I was called to pastor a small, rural church in Texas. That church was dually aligned with the SBC and CBF from about 1993 until the membership voted no longer to affiliate with the CBF as a result of the latter's amendment to its [hiring policy](#). The change in the CBF hiring policy came on the heels of the church's own discussion and study of sexuality, during which the church voted not to affirm same-sex sexual relationships.

Through these experiences and my own biblical, theological and philosophic study, I have come to a place Collins calls "centrist." Like Collins, I affirm that God can and does call women to lead in ministry at all levels. Also, like Collins, I affirm a traditional view of marriage and sexuality.

Naming these two positions places me very near that yellow stripe in the center of the road. Traffic is whizzing by on both sides, and I hear horns honking and even see an occasional bird, even if only metaphorically.

## **Where Baptists in Texas find themselves today**

When I first became involved with the BGCT, I thought Texas Baptists were

one big happy family. Over time, I've learned Texas Baptists are more complicated than that.

Historically, Baptists in Texas formed at least five different groups based on region, theology and approach to missions. The BGCT emerged from and incorporated various groups of Baptists in Texas without those distinct groups disappearing.

Now, we again have a handful of Baptist groups in Texas, ranging from fundamentalist to progressive. Those between the poles are engaged in an ongoing conversation about what it means to be between. Some feel "caught in the middle," to use Collins' phrase, and wonder where they really belong. It's a conversation well worth having.

## **Where Baptists in Texas and beyond might be able to go**

I haven't always been very charitable about those who aren't at the same place in Baptist life as me. In youthful orneriness, I was unduly critical. Through my own years of journeying through Baptist life, I've met people on all sides who have tempered my criticism. One place we can go—fundamentalist, progressive and centrist—is to be less caustic and more charitable toward each other.

Thankfully, not all Baptists have been like me. Many have worked to maintain the larger fellowship of the Baptist family and have taken abuse from all sides for doing so. These people have shown me that far better than the metaphor of a yellow stripe is the idea of being able to hold out a restorative hand in two directions.

Some see the middle shrinking. Perhaps what's really happening is the middle is widening as the poles exert more and more pressure to go one

way or the other. If the latter is the case—if the middle is widening—then centrist Baptists belong right where they are, doing the hard work of holding out a restorative hand in two directions.

It may be naïve, but the naivete of my childhood is worth rediscovering.

*Eric Black is the executive director, publisher and editor of the Baptist Standard and a former pastor. He can be reached at [eric.black@baptiststandard.com](mailto:eric.black@baptiststandard.com) or on Twitter at [@EricBlackBSP](https://twitter.com/EricBlackBSP).*