

Guest editorial: A response to 'Why I'm Leaving the Southern Baptist Convention'

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Lawrence Ware, Baptist pastor and co-director of the Center for Africana Studies at Oklahoma State University, was deeply offended by the hesitancy of the voting delegates of the Southern Baptist Convention to adopt a resolution condemning the alt-right political movement with its racist, white supremacist ideology. After some discussion and a rewriting of the resolution, the convention overwhelmingly approved the second resolution and condemned the racist and white supremacist vision of the alt-right.



Charles Wade This hesitancy, however, along with the perceived captivity of the convention to a far right-wing political vision, combined with Ware's experience with racism in Southern Baptist life, seems to have all come together causing a crisis moment for him. His position seemingly stems from his disappointment with Southern Baptists, and he has decided to withdraw from participation with Southern Baptists.

A long struggle

Upon reading his article in the *New York Times*, "[Why I'm Leaving the Southern Baptist Convention](#)," my heart sank once again, because this is a struggle that has been going on among Southern Baptists and in our nation ever since our churches began to try to understand and respond to racism in all its ugly forms.

Painful indictments can be made regarding Christian leaders across the history of America who have joined in racist and murderous attitudes toward African-Americans, Native peoples in America (American Indians), Chinese workers who helped build our national railroads, Japanese-Americans who were incarcerated after Pearl Harbor and certainly Mexican migrants who work the fields providing food for America's tables. This endemic racism has many sources, and prejudice is a prevailing sin that needs to be addressed and confronted in every generation and in every life.

"Tempted to give up on Southern Baptists"

When I was a young pastor in the early 1960s, I was tempted to give up on Southern Baptists, even though it was the only church life I knew. What kept me engaged with Southern Baptists was the influence of some gifted and courageous men.

- Walker Knight was the editor of the *Home Missions Magazine*, the communication organ of the Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. He told the stories of black Americans and the ministries that were challenging the segregationist mind-set of many Southern Baptists. His approach was like oxygen to my soul.
- T.B. Maston was professor of Christian ethics at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, and he spoke often of the need for Baptist churches to develop a new understanding of the Bible and race.
- Foy Valentine was the outspoken leader of the Christian Life

Commission of Southern Baptists (now called Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission) and in calling Baptists to a Christian embrace of all races. He, like the other two, drew the wrath and opposition of many Southern Baptist leaders and laity.

These men spoke truth to power, and they pushed against the narrow-minded and racist attitudes then prevalent in our society and in our churches. In so doing, they gave me hope!

I suspect today there are young Southern Baptists who are holding on to the hope that things will get better fostered by the leadership of Russell Moore, who now has Foy Valentine's job. Indications are he will help Southern Baptists get to a good place in their understanding of other cultures and ethnicities and come to embrace a more civil, moral and generous public life.

To be effective, however, Russell Moore must steel himself against criticism. He has faced the ire of Southern Baptist leaders this past year because of his vocal concern about the moral capacities and attitudes of the Republican nominee for president in 2016.

"A new reality"

I remember 1976, the year our family moved to First Baptist Church in Arlington, Texas, where I had been called as pastor. Jimmy Allen, pastor of First Baptist Church in San Antonio and former leader of the Christian Life Commission of Texas Baptists, was elected president of the SBC.

In the fall of that year, Georgia governor, Baptist deacon and Sunday school teacher Jimmy Carter was elected president of the United States. I thought things finally were going to get a lot better among Southern Baptists because both of these men were articulate and passionate about addressing the moral crisis that racism and greed presented to America and specifically to Southern Baptists.

But it was not to be. Jimmy Allen was followed by Adrian Rogers, who ushered in a new reality in Southern Baptist life—I called it “the Fundamentalist Takeover of the SBC.” SBC leadership called it “the Conservative Resurgence” and claimed they could make Southern Baptists great again by emphasizing “biblical inerrancy” as the only acceptable way to affirm the authority of the Holy Bible in our churches and seminaries.

Baptists like me had, and still have, a high view of Scripture and the divine inspiration of the written Word of God. We believe the Bible to be the authority by which we understand Christian doctrine and practice. We believe it to be the foundation of all we preach. But we could not in good conscience use the phrase “biblical inerrancy” because it suggested a kind of precision suitable for math equations or an engineer’s blueprint.

For many of us, it was not an appropriate or acceptable description for the inspired nature of biblical literature which was clearly not “dictated” but is the product of the Holy Spirit’s perfect work in the life of those who were witnesses to the work of God in creation, the exodus, and to the life and ministry of Jesus Christ and the early church.

It soon became clear to me that the leaders of the so-called “Conservative Resurgence” were strategically using this issue as a wedge to divide the convention and the churches. They apparently wanted control of all the institutions and agencies of the convention in order to purge all who were not loyal to their agenda.

The rise of the religious right; the decline of Southern Baptists

During this time, another movement began in the political life of America often called the “Religious Right.” The SBC provided many of the leaders and foot soldiers for this alliance.

They turned against President Carter, who led and served out of a deep Christian desire to bear witness to Jesus and exemplify the principles he

knew as a Christian and a Baptist. They threw their support to another candidate even though his religious background and practice showed little understanding and commitment to church life. For Christian leaders to hold up moral integrity as an important qualification for a national leader and then turn their backs on Carter was sad, disappointing and disturbing.

(More currently disturbing is a comment made by one Baptist pastor during the recent election cycle. Paraphrasing, his point was: we have had a Sunday school teacher as president, but now we need a strong leader—even though there is little evidence he has even a passing acquaintance with Christian convictions and practice.)

So, for the last 37 years, Southern Baptists have been dominated by leaders who have cherished their “victory” over the moderate wing of the convention—who, of course, they describe as liberals.

Some good things have happened among Southern Baptists through these years, including a growing racial diversity in the churches. But the promised victories in the churches if Southern Baptists “purified” the leadership of their institutions and professors in the schools has not come to pass. Southern Baptists have experienced decline in almost all areas of church life over these years.

Texas Baptists in the gap

When the leaders of the SBC “Conservative Resurgence” determined to take over the life, ministry and work of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, as they had done with the SBC, many Texas Baptists opposed them, and Texas Baptists were able to deny them the control of our convention and institutions (e.g., Baylor University and the *Baptist Standard*) which they so much wanted to have.

Along the way, Texas Baptists stood in the gap on behalf of the Baptist Joint Committee and the Baptist World Alliance when Southern Baptists decided

to defund and withdraw from participation in their work. When they decided not to endorse women chaplains, made unacceptable changes in theological education at the SBC seminaries, adopted a new *Baptist Faith and Message* (2000), which differed in some significant ways from the previous *BF&M* (1963), and then required all missionaries to sign the document and effectively treated it as a creed, Texas Baptists opposed them and made efforts to mitigate the damage.

The Baptist General Convention of Texas continued to support and include all Texas Baptist churches who wanted to support SBC missions and ministries, as well as those who preferred to support the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship or to support only the BGCT's mission and ministries.

“I am a Texas Baptist”

As for me, I was present for the organizing of CBF, have attended most annual gatherings and am deeply appreciative of the role CBF has played in giving a voice to those who were marginalized by Southern Baptists. When asked what kind of Baptist I am, I reply, “I am a Texas Baptist.”

I am aware that Texas Baptists are not perfect. We struggle to embrace one another and to celebrate the ethnic, linguistic and racial diversity among us. But we rejoice in all the peoples God has brought together in Texas, and we are seeking to minister to them all.

I am grateful for the years I spent as executive director of the BGCT and the opportunity to travel across Texas working with and for Texas Baptists. I saw with my own eyes our local churches more and more filled with people from different backgrounds, languages and ethnicities.

Almost 15 years ago, we elected Albert Reyes as the first Mexican-American to be the president of our Texas Baptist convention. The next year, we elected Michael Bell, the first African-American to so serve. Then we elected Joy Fenner as the first woman to hold that office. They, of

course, served with distinction, and it was my privilege to work with them in that setting.

We widened the makeup of our Executive Board and mandated that 30 percent of the 90-member board would be from our ethnic populations. What this does is raise the level of discourse and make it possible to exponentially increase real understanding of diverse cultures. We said at the time we made this change, “We want the face of Texas Baptists to look like the face of Texas.”

“We want to be better”

In the last few years as lay-member and pastor emeritus of First Baptist Church in Arlington, I have watched the church show significant signs of growing ethnic inclusivity. We have intentionally built bridges of understanding and mutual support with African-American and other ethnic congregations in our city. The missional heart of our senior pastor, staff and congregation is on display Sunday by Sunday.

Although I cannot fully understand or experience the pain of Lawrence Ware, I fully trust that his position so aptly expressed will evoke a genuine conviction and a sustained willingness to change, not only within the hearts of Southern and Texas Baptists, but also reaching out to all America.

In support, Christians and people of all faiths can immediately confront the alt-right movement honestly and courageously. We can deny its legitimacy and hold accountable its defenders. The alt-right is neither a political philosophy nor is it simply one idea among many. It is deliberately and intentionally racist, white supremacist and xenophobic while cultivating arrogance and fear. It traces its ideology to the same roots as the Ku Klux Klan and Nazi Germany. It has no place in the lives of Baptist people anywhere.

Bottom line, I do not suggest that Texas Baptists, or my own church, have

achieved an ideal awareness of the questions and commitment to the solutions. I do not criticize Lawrence Ware's decision to withdraw from participation with Southern Baptists.

But because of his discourse, perhaps we are closer to understanding what needs to happen to make a difference worth celebrating in our churches, communities and nation.

I do believe that as Baptists, and as a people, we want to be better. We are growing, and we will keep on learning and caring and making room for one another.

We know God has made room for us all.

Charles Wade is the former longtime pastor of First Baptist Church in Arlington and retired executive director of the Baptist General Convention of Texas.