

Voices: Erasing the space between BGCT and NAMB

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On TobyMac's 2022 Album, *Life After Death*, he reunites with his DC Talk bandmates on the song "Space," a song about people, once close, who now are separated by some disagreement.

The first verse identifies the situation that led to the separation, while the rest of the song asks the question: "What do we do with this space between us? How can we start to erase this space between us?"

It concludes with the hopeful sentiment, if love keeps no record of wrongs, then "we're never too far gone."

Last Wednesday morning at the Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting, I had the opportunity to pose a question to Kevin Ezell, president of the North American Mission Board. It was one for which many Texas Baptists have been seeking a definitive answer for a long time.

Will NAMB partner with churches who are singly-aligned with the Baptist General Convention of Texas to plant churches in Texas?

Dr. Ezell's response was similar to what we had heard before: NAMB only partners with churches who are connected to a state convention that affirms the Baptist Faith and Message 2000.

A simple perusal through the responses that came through articles and the scourge known as "social media" showed Texas Baptists neither were surprised by nor happy with the answer.

Erasing the space

It may come as a surprise, then, that I was thankful for Dr. Ezell's answer.

I was thankful—and satisfied—with his answer, because the real question I was asking him was not if NAMB would partner with BGCT churches. We already knew, or at minimum had assumptions about, that answer.

The primary reason I spoke in the presence of 10,000 people for a terrifying three minutes was simply to get to the final 14 seconds, and ask: “Will you personally commit to figuring out a better way forward so that a BGCT church like mine, who is also a dyed-in-the-wool Southern Baptist, can work with NAMB for the sake of God's kingdom?”

Like in TobyMac's song, the initial task was to identify the issue. Texas Baptist's view of the issue has been voiced in BGCT executive reports, *Baptist Standard* articles and in my initial remarks on Wednesday morning.

In our minds, the current situation is clear, and the more vocal among us have voiced our collective Texas-sized angst in various forms. But, the critical task before us now requires our utmost prayer and attention.

How to do it

I'm thankful Dr. Ezell's answer to my ultimate question has been to initiate a conversation about the distance between NAMB and the BGCT. Immediately following his report, he reached out via text. Since then, we have had, and will continue to have, ongoing dialogue, which I have faith will help us answer the ultimate question, “How do we erase this space between us?”

How can NAMB and Texas Baptists work to repair the relationship that has grown increasingly distant over the past 30 years? I want to suggest five

essential elements that must be present if any solution is to be found.

1. Prayer.

You knew I would start here, and you already know the centrality of prayer in any spiritually motivated task. So, I'll save my limited word count for the other three. (Psalm 107:28-30)

2. Repentance.

Marriage counselors will tell you, for a couple to move past a specific issue in their marriage, both parties must acknowledge their own responsibility for their part of the argument. Typically, there is some measure of responsibility on both sides.

As Texas Baptists (hopefully) approach discussions with NAMB around this issue, we both must have an attitude of repentance for our part in developing the current situation.

Jesus says in Matthew 18:15, "If your brother sins against you, go tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have won your brother."

But, likewise in Matthew 5:23-24, Jesus says, "If you remember your brother has something against you ... go and be reconciled to your brother."

Texas Baptists, we cannot sit entrenched, piously adjusting our halos, waiting for NAMB to take full responsibility for the space between us. We must approach with hearts of repentance for our own part in creating this space.

3. Humility.

This second essential is a natural outgrowing of repentance but takes it a

step further. If Texas Baptists are going to have the opportunity to work with NAMB in the future, we cannot approach the subject with an air of superiority. We must admit there are certain things about NAMB's position we do not know and certain circumstances we cannot control.

James 4:6 reminds us, "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble." "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall" (Proverbs 16:18). If this is true, then we most definitely can expect our efforts to erase this space to fail if we approach without humility.

4. Temperance.

I'm not talking about abstaining from alcohol, although I highly recommend it. I'm referring to the more general definition, which says: "moderation in action, thought, or feeling; restraint."

When applied to the topic at hand, temperance would encourage us to carefully moderate our emotional reactions. It's easy to hit send on some angry words on a Facebook comment. Yes, we all saw those. It might seem freeing to join the social media trolls in venting about NAMB or the SBC on an X thread. We saw those, too.

Matthew 12:36, where Jesus says, "I tell you that on the day of judgment people will have to account for every careless word they speak," should be motivation enough to temper our words. If Texas Baptists hope to erase the space between us and NAMB, then some among us will need to check our tones.

5. Negotiation.

Finally, this space will be erased only if we're willing to negotiate with those on the other side of the gap.

"My way or the highway" is the wrong way. 1 Corinthians 10:24 says, "No one is to seek his own advantage, but rather that of his neighbor." Can you

imagine the outcome if Texas Baptists and NAMB both approached the table with that attitude? The space would be erased.

We are at a pivotal moment in the history not only of Texas Baptists and NAMB, but Texas Baptists and the Southern Baptist Convention. The two parties have powerful erasers in their hands.

We either will erase the space between us and be reunited in a collective goal of reaching our state with the gospel of Christ. Or we will make the space permanent by completely erasing the missional relationship we have enjoyed for decades.

My genuine belief and hope is we're not too far gone. I hope we can erase this space between us, before it's too late.

Dustin Slaton is senior pastor at First Baptist Church in Round Rock. He serves on the BGCT Executive Board and as an adjunct professor at Howard-Payne University, New Braunfels Center. He's a graduate of Ouachita Baptist University and a two-time graduate of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. The views expressed in this opinion article are those of the author.