

# Voices: Confusing conformity with cooperation

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Two Texas Baptist churches have received [letters from the Baptist General Convention of Texas](#) letting them know they face removal from the convention. Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas and First Baptist Church in Austin were notified their welcoming and affirming stance toward LGBT members places them outside the bounds of harmonious cooperation. (In the case of Wilshire, the convention's response remains conditional upon the church's vote and, if approved, implementation.)



Garrett Vickrey In the interest of full disclosure, my father-in-law is pastor of Wilshire. Also, the congregation in which I was raised and where my father was pastor 27 years, Royal Lane Baptist Church in Dallas, was disfellowshipped by the BGCT in 2010 for ordaining gay deacons. One gay deacon was even given a missions award by the BGCT—an award eventually taken back. I assume the logic being only non-sinners are eligible for such a prestigious award.

All three of these congregations, along with many others, are separated from the Southern Baptist Convention because it consistently infringed upon the autonomy of local churches to direct their life and ministry.

## **Audacious interference**



Now, the BGCT has inserted itself into a congregational discernment process by issuing this letter of dismissal in the midst of a churchwide vote at Wilshire. Before the church even made a decision, the convention sent this letter. This is an audacious interference in local-church life that should be a red flag to churches throughout Texas.

“Harmonious cooperation” with the convention is based on three factors—giving, prayer and engagement in ministry. These three items have not been breached by First Austin or Wilshire but have been interrupted by BGCT staff. By announcing it will rescind checks from the congregation, the BGCT staff has taken unauthorized action and has ended harmonious cooperation that was continuing until staff action—not convention or Executive Board action—was taken.

As stated in governance, no resolution from the BGCT is binding on a congregation. Disagreement with a resolution position on marriage or any other BGCT resolution is only a minority opinion by a congregation and not grounds for sanctions. No church that allows LGBT people full acceptance into community life has said, “We disagree with the resolution, and we ask that all churches not sharing our minority opinion be disfellowshipped from the BGCT.”

## **Step toward creedalism**

These churches are choosing to cooperate, even while holding to a minority view within the convention. Yet the convention demands conformity. The convention is confusing cooperation with conformity, which is a dangerous step toward creedalism.

The convention has overstepped its bounds in demanding conformity of belief on issues they are not ready to fully move on. The letter to the churches states: "We believe the Bible teaches that any sexual relationship outside the bounds of a marriage between a man and woman is sin. This includes same-sex sexual behaviors." But this statement is not limited to same-sex behaviors.

Does this mean the convention is prepared to disfellowship any church whose pastor performs the marriage of a man and a woman engaging in sexual intercourse before marriage? I hope a convention that feels led by conscience, as they say, will follow through on their convictions with faith and fairness.

Or are LGBT communities simply an easy target for the convention to excise in order to keep to some perceived Pharisaic holiness branded as the "biblical way"?

### **Who gets to say ...?**

Who gets to say what is "biblical," a convention or faithful followers of Christ in local churches? Turning the "Bible" into an adjective undermines its authority. Too often, "biblical" is a term used to bludgeon minority opinions. Scripture is too important to be leveraged as a means of silencing opposition. After all, the Apostle Paul says, "Who are you to pass judgements on servants of another?" This is one of the foundational scriptural passages for Baptist principles like the autonomy of the local church and soul competency.

This interference should concern churches on all sides of the human sexuality conversations. Even churches that lean toward the more traditional or conservative side of human sexuality issues should be concerned that the convention believes it has the authority to intervene in local-church life in this way. For this reason, my church, Woodland Baptist,

has decided not to give to the BGCT next year.

When creedalism demands conformity, who says where the lines are drawn? Will conventions define faith for local churches? Or will congregations of faithful Christians cooperate together, trusting that Christ is the Lord of life and death? God is greater than our petty opinions and even our soundest doctrine. Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.

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