

Voices: Sad for Texas Baptists

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As I've read the back-and-forth about Baylor University turning down a grant from the Baugh Foundation regarding a study that involved the LGBTQ+ community, I have been mostly sad - sad about what the Baptist General Convention of Texas (BGCT) could have been.

The BGCT had an opportunity to be fully and truly Baptist, but fear robbed the convention of that opportunity.

It appears to me that most people, even some of our own board members, did not understand what Texas Baptists Committed was about: creating a convention that was truly Baptist - a big tent where fundamentalists, moderates, and even liberals could still cooperate in the mission of Christ.

Many thought TBC was about promoting moderate theology over fundamentalist theology. That was never true.

TBC was about defending Baptist principles and educating Baptists about them: "Four Fragile Freedoms," as Buddy Shurden named them:

- The authority of scripture without creeds
- The priesthood of all believers
- Local church autonomy
- Religious liberty and the separation of church and state

This was the beginning and end of our mission—to keep Baptists Baptist. There was never a specific theological agenda. We did, however, have an agenda of preventing fundamentalists from controlling the convention or its committees because we knew they would shut everyone else out.

The BGCT never did that. During my 22 years as executive director of TBC, any committee I was involved in naming always included Baptists of all

theological persuasions. We tried to be a big tent but not so big that fundamentalists could control the BGCT as they controlled the Southern Baptist Convention.

However, in 2016 fear gripped some of our pastors and leaders - fear that too much freedom was dangerous. As a result, the convention voted to disenfranchise some churches that had a welcoming and/or affirming view toward LGBTQ+ persons.

Keeping strong convictions and an open mind

Now this fear has claimed, with Baylor its tool, its latest victims: the Baugh Foundation grant and LGBTQ+ people who might have benefited from this study. It didn't have to be this way. We could have stayed Baptist and kept a big tent.

I know people who consider homosexual behavior sinful and transgender transitions a perversion of God's creation. They are people of deep convictions. Many are personal friends of mine and former supporters and even board members of TBC.

My purpose is not to argue with them about theology surrounding these matters. My purpose is to defend and promote Baptist principles and show them why the action they took in 2016 and Baylor's recent action in rejecting the Baugh Foundation grant are violations of these treasured Baptist principles.

Take a look at the following two statements:

- "The New Testament is crystal clear that a woman cannot be a pastor." - Paige Patterson on the day that he was inaugurated as president of Southwestern Seminary

- “We fully agree that any grant that advocates for perspectives on human sexuality that are counter to biblical sexual ethics should be declined or returned. Right decisions are usually easy; righteous decisions are usually costly.” – Letter signed by pastors in support of Baylor’s rejection of the Baugh Foundation grant

Sadly, both statements reflect the same mentality and biblical view which is “I’m right, you’re wrong and if you don’t agree with me you don’t believe the Bible.”

Most signers of the Baylor letter would not agree at all with Paige Patterson’s statement but sadly practice the same attitude when it comes to what they call “biblical sexual ethics.”

This destroys cooperation. Friends, it doesn’t have to be this way if we honor, respect, and follow historic Baptist principles.

Coming back to collaboration

As I’ve written before, I imagine my great-grandfather Robert Morrison Currie, who founded the First Baptist Church in LaVernia in 1857 after coming to Texas from Mississippi (and was the first moderator of the San Antonio Baptist Association) sincerely believed the New Testament was crystal clear that a white man could own a Black man.

But, as Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 13:12, we all “see through a glass, darkly.” We are all influenced by many factors in our interpretation of scripture. Deeply held convictions are a wonderful thing unless they lead us to dogmatism and the sin of certainty. Then we exclude people who don’t agree with us and cooperation – and Christian fellowship – is destroyed.

Texas Baptists had a chance to be a big tent convention. I hope they will once again create a place for Baptists of all theological views to join and

collaborate. After all, that is what the priesthood of all believers and local church autonomy are all about.

Freedom is the heart of being Baptist. Stop being afraid of it!

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