

MY STORY:

A PERSONAL ADVENTURE IN UNHOLY RIGHTEOUSNESS

Joe Yelton

Like most children reared in southern tradition mixed with Baptist participation, I rarely gave much thought to what it meant to be Baptist. In fact, I was beyond childhood before noticing that Baptist is spelled with a *p* and not a *b*. The sign outside my home church, First Baptist of Asheville, North Carolina, was the instructor. The usual mix of Sunbeams, RAs, and youth activities flavored a rich tradition of preaching and teaching. I was Baptist and felt good about it.

My unassuming Baptist world would be changed forevermore when my pastor, Dr. Cecil Sherman, returned from the 1979 annual meeting of the SBC, warning of ominous clouds on the horizon. I believed him, but was certain that there must be some exaggeration to the thoughts given over a coming "Convention-wide split." After all, the SBC was too large to split, and the Cooperative Program was too perfect to leave. Or so I thought.

I attended my first SBC annual meeting in 1981. It was held in Los Angeles. This would be the first of ten in a row. The 1990 Convention

meeting in New Orleans would not assuredly be my last. Frankly, it was not the political outcomes of those conventions that drove me away. I can lose with grace; after all, I am a Democrat. It was the feeling, year after year, that I had been congregationally and politically raped that tapped the final coffin nail. Upon my return from national Convention meetings, I would be out of sorts for weeks, trying to piece together why it is that I am a proud Southern Baptist. Witnessing brutish power in the name of God was and is a hard pill to swallow. Determining God's will based on majority vote was sickening.

During the early 1980s, I led the church I pastored to move our Cooperative Program giving to 22 percent of our annual budget. Though a small-town church, this sacrifice was a gladly received opportunity. We understood we had to give more to make up for the SBC megachurch leadership who gave either nothing or token contributions.

By this time, I not only knew that Baptist was spelled with a *p*, I also understood something of our rich heritage and our historic belief in soul competency and local church independence. I watched year by year as the uncompromisable was compromised. Churches were told how to select ministers, women were told how to serve and not serve God, and those who had given their life's blood in service to God through the SBC were shown the proverbial door.

Oddly enough, it was two events that occurred in the SBC annual meeting in San Antonio that sealed for me the reality that my tenure within the SBC was concluding. No matter what the armchair quarterbacks back home said about this being strictly a "preacher's fight" that would never directly impact them, I knew from these events that it was much, much more.

The first happened outside of the convention center when a Criswell Bible College student noticed a lapel pin I was wearing. Apparently, he was offended. With his big smile and backslapping "Howdy," we began a dialogue. In this discussion, he would aim most of his darts at the liberalism within Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. He was particular in his analysis and scathing in his review. Specific, he was not. He could call no names, no locations, only a litany of stories about what one liberal professor had taught about the virgin birth, and what another had said about homosexuality.

I asked him how much time he spent on the campus to achieve this information. As it turns out, he had never been to North Carolina. I then

told him that I had three years invested there, and later my wife fulfilled her two-year commitment. I told him that we were never recipients of such data. He insisted that he had the data "back home." At this impasse, I gave him my card and asked that he mail me the information. Of course, that was the end of that. But from the experience there was solidified for me the reality that truth is of little consequence to these masters of the takeover. What matters is results, and if stories concocted or distorted assisted in this quest, so be it and to God be the glory.

The second lesson came inside the convention center. When the report was being given to the convention regarding a new chair for the Nominating Committee, the Reverend John Reid stood to challenge the nomination. He cited that the proposed candidate was pastor of a non-Southern Baptist Congregation. To this, the convention president countered, "What's your point?" After a moment's hesitation, Reverend Reid responded, "My point Mr. President is, it would seem that in a denomination of thirteen million members, we ought to be able to find at least one of us who is able to chair our Nominating Committee." At this point, he was ruled out of order and was booed as he left the microphone. His point had been made to those of us who were again witnessing the blatant misuse of the president's platform power to propel a personal agenda. To the majority of those in attendance, however, the issue he took with a non-Southern Baptist chairing the Nominating Committee was apparently a non-issue.

That evening, I sat by the hotel pool and struck up a conversation with a stranger. This layman was gentle and kind and quite grandfatherly in his persona. After determining that I, like he, was a messenger to the annual meeting, he said, "Wasn't that mess about the chairman of the nominating committee a disaster?" I assured him of my agreement. But then I realized that we both saw the action as a car wreck, but were at odds over which driver was at fault. He said, "Yes, that man who spoke up about the chairman not being a member of the Southern Baptist Convention was only nit-picking and trying to stir up trouble." It was there that I realized that the Convention of my youth was gone. It was there that I discovered that the chasm separating moderates and conservative/fundamentalist Baptists was too wide and stony to be breached.

In 1992, the church I pastored officially left the SBC. By 1998, I was serving a new congregation, and they too have officially cut all ties to the SBC. Am I proud of this action? No, but I am immensely proud of the

congregations who took it. Did we lose anything in the process? We lost nothing that had not already been terminated in the 1980s. Will I look back? No, because I move on to brighter and better ways of cooperatively doing missions. I wish the SBC well. Many good people remain steadfast there. I pray that as the new generation of SBC leadership assumes responsibilities, they, more than their predecessors, will be more intent on truth, kindness, forbearance, scriptural integrity, and righteousness.