

GOD'S WORDS IN THE LANGUAGE OF MEN:
THE PROFESSIONALIZATION OF THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST PRESS

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by
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GOD'S WORDS IN THE LANGUAGE OF MEN:
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DEDICATION

To Southern Baptist journalists who worked for and fought for the right to report information church members needed, both the positive and negative, and who faced criticism and job loss with integrity.

Especially to Dan Martin, my journalism hero and my friend.

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ABSTRACT

Although religion is and has been an integral aspect of society, its journalism has been overlooked. Media scholars have viewed the religious press as less worthy and less professional than its commercial counterparts, despite the fact that religious media reaches millions of people. This study illuminates the professional development of the Southern Baptist press as an example of religious media's effort to provide news and information to their audiences. Journalists in religious media balance their personal faith, the specific faith traditions for which they work, and professionalism. Southern Baptist journalists exhibited the traits, practices, and beliefs that mark journalistic professionalism. This dissertation shows how the Civil Rights Movement and the SBC's further shift to the theological and political right affected Southern Baptist journalism. Southern Baptist newswriters lived their religion through the practice of journalism in spite of the denomination's institutional barriers. Freedom of the press and autonomy became the professional values most at stake for newswriters as denominational leaders insisted journalists should concentrate on promotion. Through the Civil Rights Movement, most journalists tried to maintain a centrist position, pushing obedience to federal law and the effect on mission efforts overseas. A few courageous journalists pushed for Southern Baptists to recognize all people as children of God. The Southern

Baptist Convention's further shift to the theological and political right cost several journalists their jobs and essentially returned SBC journalism to its promotional roots.

INTRODUCTION

Al Shackleford and Dan Martin had no idea their years of experience as professional journalists would not protect them from losing their jobs with the national religious press service, Baptist Press, in 1990. Both men had pursued their careers under the banner of integrity, truth and objectivity. Both men saw their journalism as a means to live out their faith in service to others. Both were esteemed professionals among religious and commercial journalists.¹ But Shackleford and Martin were among those who lost their positions as Southern Baptist journalists who pushed for independent Baptist media, free to cover negative institutional struggles, as well as positive aspects of denominational life. They lost their jobs when a fundamental-conservative movement within the Southern Baptist Convention pushed the denomination further to the theological and political right. That push, which culminated in new leadership, was the second of two movements from 1954 to 1990 — the Civil Rights Movement and the strong conservative movement — that shifted the course of professionalization among Southern Baptist journalists.

This study examined the way in which the Civil Rights Movement encouraged the continued professionalization of Southern Baptist journalism and how some journalists during that movement were at the forefront in changing Southern Baptist attitudes about

¹ Several commercial and religious publications decried the firings. *New York Times* writer Ari L. Goldman noted that Shackleford and Martin “helped shape” Baptist Press “into a news service trusted by many journalists as open and objective” (Ari L. Goldman, “2 Southern Baptist News Chiefs Are Dismissed,” *New York Times*, July 19, 1990, accessed November 28, 2018. <http://www.nytimes.com/1990/07/19/us/2-southern-baptist-news-chiefs-are-dismissed>).

race. Although Southern Baptist editors did not react as quickly or as aggressively as their mainstream counterparts, the Civil Rights Movement sparked a growing concern for social issues and less emphasis on denominational self-promotion. The formation of a separate organization for Southern Baptist public relations specialists coincided with the movement and helped push for more trained journalists in Baptist state paper newsrooms.

This dissertation also considered how the shift further to the theological and political right changed the definition of professionalism for Southern Baptist journalists, returning to denominational promotion as their primary role. Conservative leaders either dismissed or forced out those journalists, like Shackelford and Martin, who wanted Southern Baptist news outlets to have the freedom to report the positive and negative aspects of denominational life.

The distinction in the professionalization of Southern Baptist journalists is how the role religious faith and the denomination's values and requirements informed journalistic values and roles. Southern Baptist media workers, especially in the studied period, had to balance their religious faith and denominational roles with those values and roles seen as essential to professional journalists in the commercial realm—a balance of belief systems.

John Nerone describes journalism as “a belief system. In particular, it is the belief system that defines the appropriate practices and values of news professionals.”² Much scholarly consideration has been given to the professionalization of the American press, but little attention has focused on the religious niche. Religious faith expresses itself in a

² John Nerone, “The historical roots of the normative model of journalism,” *Journalism* 14, no. 4 (2012), 447, doi: 10.1177/1464884912464177.

variety of “isms,” including through journalism. Faith traditions are belief systems that impact adherents, and clergy have long been considered professionals. Because religious publications often began with clergy in the editorial chair, their professional attitudes as ministers influenced the editorial decisions they made.

Spreading their doctrine is intrinsic to most religious groups, and for some, religious knowledge is often inseparable from observance. “Nowhere did the dissemination of religious truth assume greater importance than in Christianity. Jesus himself is presented as the Word, the communication of God,” Mark Silk notes. Since Jesus’ day, religious leaders “have undertaken to regulate what was written about questions of faith and morals.”³ They sought to spread their interpretation of God’s word without any outside filter.

The desire to spread the Christian message led to the formation of religious tract and Bible societies between 1805 and 1815, most of which merged to form the American Bible Society in 1816 and the American Tract Society in 1825. Historian David Nord considers the societies as the true forerunners of mass media because of “their pioneering work in mass printing and mass distribution of the written word.”⁴ Most religious magazines and newspapers that developed as printing technology allowed mass

³ Mark Silk, *Unsecular Media: Making News of Religion in America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 3-4.

⁴ David Paul Nord, “The Evangelical Origins of Mass Media in America, 1815-1835,” *Journalism Monographs* 88 (May 1984), ed. L.B. Becker (Columbus, Ohio: The Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communications, 1984), 2. Also see Richard W. Flory, “Promoting a Secular Standard: Secularization and Modern Journalism, 1870-1930” in *The Secular Revolution: Power, Interests, and Conflict in the Secularization of American Public Life*, ed. Christian Smith (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003) 395-433. Flory agrees that religious organizations were instrumental in developing publishing technology and distribution. However, he contends that regarding content, “the increasingly fragmented nature of religions, including competing religious groups, weakened their ability to mount any sustained, unified efforts in journalism.” He contends market share, not theology or denominational promotions, should have been the driving force to sustain Protestant journalism (429).

production tended to be nonsectarian at first. But by 1830, several denominations had started specific publications, which most used “to spread their particular version of Christianity.”⁵ Baptist individuals developed newspapers to promulgate their understanding of the Christian message and to provide denominational information to members, with the Georgia Baptist *Christian Index* (originally *The Columbian Star*) as the first.⁶ Early Baptist newspapers included sermons, poems, some local news such as market prices, and information from state and national Baptist bodies. The papers shifted to more news throughout the period of study.

Even though religious publishers and the religious press were early adopters of printing technology and its economic benefit, their development has attracted little scholarly attention. Most study of the religious press tends to examine how it was used to promote or to disparage larger social and political issues, such as race relations, war and peace, and poverty, among a host of others. My study explores the professionalization of the Southern Baptist press, through a framework of lived religion, as a first step in understanding the further development of religious media. This study explores Baptist editors and administrators’ understanding of “professional” journalism and how their professionalism changed. Though this dissertation includes the historical development of

⁵ Carol Sue Humphrey, “Religious Newspapers and Antebellum Reform,” in *Media and Religion in American History*, ed. Wm. David Sloan, 104-118. (Northport, Ala.: Vision Press, 2000).

⁶ Early Baptist newspapers were started and owned by Baptist individuals, with *The Christian Index* as the first in 1822, and the oldest continuously published religious newspaper in the U.S. Baptist state conventions later either voted to adopt the independent Baptist newspaper in its state as its “official” news outlet or purchased it outright. Each newspaper was either allowed to operate with the guidance of an independent board of directors or to be directly controlled by convention-appointed trustees. See christianindex.org/our-history and Jack U. Harwell, *An Old Friend with New Credentials: A History of The Christian Index* (Atlanta, Ga.: *The Christian Index*, Executive Committee of the Baptist Convention of the State of Georgia, 1972).

Baptist media, my study focuses on the period from 1954 to 1990, when both the Civil Rights Movement and the conservative shift reshaped the Southern Baptist Convention as a whole.

Determining how Southern Baptist journalism developed requires defining professionalism. The professionalization of journalism has long been debated among media and sociology scholars. Medicine, law, and the clergy were the first occupations to be considered professions because of the knowledge practitioners required, their manner of organization, and the way in which they regulated members.⁷ Tumber and Prentoulis point out that journalism is difficult to classify because “[f]rom its beginning it was a more diverse and undefined activity compared with the ‘classic’ professions.” Before the nineteenth century, no divide existed between journalists and other writers. Journalism was considered part of the literary world, as just another genre in literary tradition.⁸ But in the mid- through late-nineteenth century, journalists began moving toward declaring their work as a profession and themselves as professionals, a gradual process that led to more specific definitions of the journalistic profession by the mid-twentieth century. Ernest Greenwood is credited with a more decisive definition, which included “systematic theory ... authority ... community sanction ... ethical codes, and ... a culture” as characteristics. In 1968, sociologist Talcott Parsons added formal training and

⁷ Stephen A. Banning, “The professionalization of journalism: A nineteenth century beginning,” *Journalism History* 24, no. 4 (1998): 558; and Howard Tumber and Marina Prentoulis, “Journalism and the Making of a Profession,” in *Making Journalists: Divers models, global issues*, ed. Hugo de Burgh (London: Routledge, 2005), 58, 60.

⁸ Tumber and Prentoulis, 61.

“control to ensure social responsibility” to the mix.⁹ Nerone defines journalism in terms of “appropriate practices and values of news professionals.”¹⁰

Ethics also is an aspect of the development of journalistic professionalism and maintains a continued presence. Craft defines ethics “as an account of what journalists’ duties are, to whom they are owed, and how journalists ought to go about meeting them.”¹¹ Although ethics is not personal feelings, law, societal standards, or religion,¹² Baptist editors, particularly those trained as ministers, practiced journalism from an ethical point of view steeped in faith as they understood it.

Although the components of journalistic professionalism are still argued, this study considered journalistic professionalism of the Baptist press as including certain traits, practices, and beliefs—an association/professional organization, a formalized code of ethics, formal training or informal courses and workshops, independence/autonomy, a news culture, and common news values and ideology. I examined the ways in which Baptist journalists understood these aspects and how these signs of professionalism manifested in Baptist newswork.¹³ For the editors, especially those formally trained, the clash among news, denominational, and individual values and ideology has had the most profound effect on professionalization. Independence, individual lived religion and

⁹ Banning, 157-159.

¹⁰ Nerone, 447.

¹¹ Craft, 263.

¹² Stephanie Craft and Charles N. Davis, *Principles of American Journalism: An Introduction* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016).

¹³ Tumber and Prentoulis (60) add “political agitation directed towards the protection of the association by law” as a “stage” in professionalism. Apparently, SBPA members were not concerned about the association’s legal status. In the 1980s, they became concerned about the association’s status within the Southern Baptist Convention. That concern was tied to issues over autonomy and press freedom.

participation in denominational journalism as “holy calling” were among the most contested aspects, especially during the Southern Baptist Convention shift further to the ideological and political right.

A degree of professionalism may have been assumed among journalists in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century denominational press since clergy already were considered professionals. Religious media were an extension of the clergy initially. Most Baptist editors were clergy, chosen either because they saw writing as a ministry or they had established themselves as denominational leaders on the state or national level.¹⁴ As editors, Southern Baptist clergy continued the religious press’ push for advancement in the late nineteenth century with the establishment of their own formal organization. The Southern Baptist Press Association organized in Atlanta, Georgia, on November 21, 1895, with its first regular session on May 6 the following year, just prior to the Southern Baptist Convention’s annual meeting in Chattanooga, Tennessee.¹⁵ By comparison, the American Newspaper Publishers Association had been formed in 1887,¹⁶ and the Society for Professional Journalists was founded in 1909 as Sigma Delta Chi.¹⁷

Junker posits three reasons for Baptist communicators to create a formal organization. First, society was “settling” from the effects of the Civil War. The Baptist

¹⁴ C. William Junker, *Contending for the Right to Know: A history of the Southern Baptist Press Association, 1895-1995* (Franklin, Tenn.: Providence House Publishers, 1996). Junker indicates that most members of the Southern Baptist Press Association were or had been pastors or denominational leaders. Also see Jack U. Harwell, *An Old Friend with New Credentials: A history of The Christian Index* (Atlanta, Ga.: *The Christian Index*, Executive Committee of the Baptist Convention of the State of Georgia, 1972).

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 13-17.

¹⁶ American Society of News Editors website, asne.org/asne-history.

¹⁷ Society for Professional Journalists website, spj.org/aboutspj.asp. Several press associations, formed between 1900 and 1949, are briefly discussed in chapter 1.

state papers had struggled financially through the war and Reconstruction. Second, the number of Southern Baptist publications, either SBC-owned or independent, had grown. Twelve of the thirty-eight state Southern Baptist papers existing in 2018 were established before 1895 and others developed. Some states had more than one Baptist newspaper. The Baptist Sunday School Board had three publications as part of the Southern Baptist Press Association, with both the Home and Foreign Mission boards and Southern Baptist Theological Seminary each having a publication represented. Third, the editors and other representatives wanted “to promote a greater spirit of fraternity,” to build up their “common Zion” or theological understanding, and to help each other with the business of newspapering.¹⁸

Junker does not indicate in his history whether SBPA organizers developed a code of ethics. Much of the original material about the organization’s history between 1896 and 1926 is not available. The Baptist historian relied on stories in member newspapers for accounts of SBPA activity in the first few years. However, none of them reported the association’s activity from 1906 to 1917.¹⁹ The association’s 1929 minutes note that

¹⁸ Junker, 13-14. Junker declares a specific ending to Southern Baptist dealings with the Civil War and its aftermath, regarding other Baptist groups. The denomination sought to “reassert its regional separateness. ... The end of Southern Baptists’ reconstruction era is considered to be May 8-12, 1879, when the Convention met in Atlanta. Led by I.T. Tichenor, John A. Broadus, Henry H. Tucker (editor of *The Christian Index*), and others, the SBC kindly but firmly ended the issue of reunion with the Northern Convention.” The Northern Convention became the American Baptist Churches in the USA. Although thirty-eight papers were active in 2018, the Southern Baptist Convention no longer recognized *Word & Way* in Missouri. Consequently, the Association of State Baptist Papers removed *Word & Way* from its membership in 2010, likely during a meeting the editors held in June in conjunction with the SBC annual session. In a November 23, 2010, letter to the association, then-editor William R. “Bill” Webb expressed regret for the decision, pointing out that the newspaper was the result of a merger with *The Central Baptist*, which was represented at the Southern Baptist Press Association’s founding in 1895. (Letter from William R. Webb to the Association of State Baptist Papers, in care of its president, Bobby S. Terry, November 23, 2010. Likely, Terry read the letter at the following ASBP annual meeting in February 2011.)

¹⁹ Ibid, 44-45. Junker relied on SBPA reports that appear in Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting Book of Reports for those “silent” years.

members discussed journalism ethics, which opened a discussion of newspaper improvement. But the minutes do not specify whether a code was already in place.²⁰ Perhaps a formal code was drawn up in those early years, as indicated by the fact that members of the Baptist Public Relations Association formulated a code of ethics when they split from the SBPA in 1954, and the SBPA code itself was updated in 1955.²¹ In June 1997, members of the press organization (by then renamed the Association of State Baptist Papers) discussed whether to develop a new code of ethics. They reviewed codes Associated Church Press and the Evangelical Press Association had adopted, but took no action, choosing to defer possible consideration until their annual meeting the following February.²²

The Southern Baptist Press Association wanted its members to have access to journalism training and generally offered a workshop at each annual meeting, usually held in February. In the 1920s and 1930s, members themselves provided training, with a few selected at each meeting to address the body on a given topic—from increasing subscription numbers to dealing with advertising from other SBC agencies. The association sometimes invited commercial journalists and university professors to present. For example, at the SBPA meeting in Nashville in January 1935, the Nashville

²⁰ Southern Baptist Press Association - Minutes, 1926-41 (Box 1, file 1.55), Southern Baptist Press Association Records, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Nashville, Tenn.

²¹ Baptist Public Relations Association, Wilmer Clemont Fields Papers (Box 12, file 12.55), Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Nashville, Tenn. The 1955 SBPA updated code is found in the W.C. Fields Papers,.

²² This information came from unindexed ASBP records the executive director of the Baptist Communicators Association is storing at the office (as of December 2018). Information considering an ethics code came from minutes of a meeting at the ASBP dinner held in conjunction with the SBC annual meeting in June 1997. No other reference is recorded through 2006. BCA, started in 1953 as Baptist Public Relations Association, changed its name in 1996 because its membership includes all Southern Baptist communicators. It hosts workshops and offers awards.

Tennessean managing editor addressed how he viewed denominational newspapers, and the city editor at the *Nashville Banner* explained how he obtained and presented the news.²³ The SBPA often offered editorial training at its meetings. As early as the 1960s, the association emphasized to its members to find ways to encourage Baptist youth to choose a journalism career. Several state papers provided scholarships to journalism students. Members also intentionally pushed for professional training, with journalism seminars offered each summer from 1960 through at least 1987. Some of those sessions were hosted in conjunction with universities, including Syracuse, and were led by university professors.²⁴ The association began issuing press cards by the late 1950s and provided Associated Press style books in 1961.²⁵

Journalistic independence as a measure of professionalization could be hotly debated as applied to religious media. Over time, the religious press took on two models, partly dependent upon the form of denominational governance. Denominational leaders that act in the publisher role—those with direct control over communications—are more concerned with providing followers with positive information about the organization, encouraging adherence to denominational requirements, and instilling conformance with institutional interpretations of polity and sacred texts. These leader-publishers tend to follow an institutional, public relations model of journalism. Episcopal polity, such as that followed by the Episcopal Church, and hierarchical polity, such as that of the Catholic Church, generally fit the institutional model. Episcopal polity generally

²³ SBPA – Minutes, 1926-41. Southern Baptist Press Association Records (Box 1, file 1.55), Southern Baptist Press Association Records.

²⁴ Fields Papers.

²⁵ SBPA Minutes, 1961, Southern Baptist Press Association Records (Box 1, file 1.58).

functions with one primary leader at the top. This leader has the power to control the denomination's communications, including its news outlets.²⁶ The presbyterian form of polity falls into the institutional, public relations model as well because it places authority in the hands of a group of leaders. The Presbyterian Church is the primary example of this form. Elders or presbyters are the governing body of the local church. Each body answers to a higher body of elders or presbyters. The final board, often called the general assembly, maintains authority over denominational matters, including communications and publishing.²⁷

The congregational form of governance emphasizes autonomy at each level of church work. Several denominations of Baptists follow this form, which tends to allow for more independence for its communicators. Southern Baptists established their denominational structure on autonomy tempered with cooperation. The denomination, both at the state and national levels, sometimes supported press freedom and sometimes it did not. Its editors tended to follow mainstream journalism's adversarial, independent model.²⁸ The demarcation line between the two approaches is not always clear, partly due to denominational trends and partly to outside stresses over which religious media have no control.

²⁶ "An Episcopal Dictionary of the Church," The Episcopal Church, www.episcopalchurch.org/library/glossary/polity; "What are the different forms of church polity?" Got Questions, www.gotquestions.org/church-polity.html. Accessed May 5, 2019.

²⁷ "What are the different forms of church polity?" Got Questions, www.gotquestions.org/church-polity.html; "Presbyterian Church Government," Encyclopedia Britannica, www.britannica.com/topic/presbyterian. Accessed May 5, 2019.

²⁸ William J. Thorn and Bruce Garrison, "Institutional stress: Journalistic norms in the Catholic Press," *Review of Religious Research* 25, no. 1 (September 1983), 49-50.

The Civil Rights Movement helped blur that demarcation for a time. The fundamental-conservative shift, however, made that demarcation a barrier that could no longer be crossed. Denominational unity was stretched during the Civil Rights Movement. In some ways, Baptist communicators, including the state papers, and the SBC agencies, especially its Christian Life Commission and Home Mission Board, helped hold the SBC together by championing Blacks as equal children of God. But the hard-right conservative shift snapped some of unity's strands, with the state papers divided, editors fired, and new publications and news organizations launched.

The unity ideal kept Southern Baptist journalists from following their mainstream counterparts as they pushed for a professionalization project in the 1920s, or, at least the denominational newsmen who did, did so unobtrusively. Commercial journalism's push for professionalization after World War I was a response to strong criticism of national propaganda campaigns waged during the conflict. The professionalization project promised a measure of autonomy for journalists,²⁹ an independence most Southern Baptist Press Association members shunned for the sake of unity.

Unity and cooperation have been key concepts for most SBC leaders, especially since 1925. That year the convention developed the Cooperative Program, its funding mechanism that remains the primary financial base for SBC agencies and ministries. It relies on giving at the local-church level, a portion of which is sent to the state organization, which then sends a portion of those gifts to the national body.³⁰ The Cooperative Program solidified the desire for unity. "To be 'noncooperative' is a serious

²⁹ Nerone, 450.

³⁰ Leonard, 393.

thing to Southern Baptists, and to be ‘independent’ has become a severe criticism,” McBeth wrote. Beginning that year, the SBC moved toward more centralization, with messengers to the 1927 annual meeting approving formation of the Executive Committee to act for the convention between the yearly sessions.³¹

The desire for cooperation and unity came at the cost of a degree of independence for Southern Baptists and their press. Small internal groups could create enough discord about issues (theological and political) to shift the denomination’s direction, often to save SBC unity. The majority of members would not challenge the shifts. In the early 1920s, a small fundamentalist faction stepped up its complaint against “modernism” within the convention. The group forced denominational leaders to tighten and formalize the SBC’s informal doctrinal summary released in 1920. In 1925, the convention adopted its first confessional statement, *The Baptist Faith and Message*.³² Though members did not realize it at the time, the statement marked the beginning of the stronger conservative shift that would take place later in the century. Revised in 1963 and again in 2000, the statement was used to crack cooperation and force some factions out of the denomination, primarily with its declaration of the Bible as sole authority and the position of women within the church and denomination.

That small further shift to the right also created an underlying tension in the professionalization of Southern Baptist media that eventually moved convention-related press to temper its news-oriented approach. The continued move toward centralization, cooperation, and unity pushed Baptist press and its journalists to accept it as well, which

³¹ Junker, 59, quoting H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage* (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1987), 622.

³² *Ibid*, 60.

meant redefining news values. In many cases, journalists who did not accept it were forced to find other ministries within the denomination or to look elsewhere. Objectivity, truth, and independence were challenged.

Eventually, national- and state-level Baptist newsrooms became places where ideological or worldview shifts and power issues sometimes collided. Louis Moore, a former religion editor at the *Houston (Texas) Chronicle* and, later, an associate vice president of the SBC Foreign Mission Board, succinctly explained the shift that took place during the conservative movement. “As a journalist, we want to tell the story, but in the denomination, we need to put the best spin on it.”³³ Tennessee Baptists’ *Baptist & Reflector* Editor Lonnie Wilkey sees his as a dual role. “The journalism [religious and commercial] is the same, should be the same ...—the facts.... [Religion] is our main topic...our beat. The journalism should be the same for everybody. [Regarding advocacy], the journalist in me says no but the realist says yes. I try to report the news, but I am an advocate for the Tennessee Baptist Convention.”³⁴

The concept of lived religion within the denominational community provides a framework in which to understand the approach taken by Southern Baptist editors in the time of the study. Sociologists have used lived religion as a theoretical framework since the early twentieth century. Max Weber studied the patterns of the life of world religions, in addition to their systems. As the study of the sociology of religion expanded to include more diversity, lived religion as a framework has become more prevalent since the 1980s

³³ Louis Moore, interview by author, Plano, Texas, August 14, 2018.

³⁴ Lonnie Wilkey, phone interview by author, August 28, 2018.

and 1990s.³⁵ Lived religion does not separate religious faith and practice from daily living. The sacred “comes into being in an ongoing, dynamic relationship with the realities of everyday life,” and religion and experience are more integrated.³⁶ Religion and daily living have been depicted as separate, each confined to a specific sphere of an individual’s existence. Believers utilize religious practices as creative actions to touch the world as they live in it. “All religious ideas and impulses are of the moment, invented, taken, borrowed, and improvised at the intersections of life,” Orsi notes.³⁷ Religious practice and understanding—faith—merge the spiritual and the physical, and daily behavior cannot be separated from belief.³⁸

Southern Baptists, as many evangelicals, live their religious practice as “a personal relationship with a powerful divine figure who is able miraculously to touch one’s life.” For many evangelicals, prayer is an “intimate...conversation” and is practiced with the expectation of receiving an answer in some form.³⁹ For Southern Baptist editors, that divine figure is God through Jesus. Not only did the editors in the study period believe daily behavior had to reflect their faith, but also that God had called them

³⁵ Nancy Tatom Ammerman, “Finding religion in everyday life.” *Sociology of Religion* 75, no. 2 (2014), 191-194, doi: 10.1093/socrel/sru013. Ammerman and other sociologists continue to study lived religion in everyday life. “If finding religion requires finding places where there is *only* religion, then there is little for us to do” (195). Media sociologist Stewart Hoover draws on Clifford Geertz’s definition of religion, which centers on “the ways people describe themselves and their practices as religious.” See Stewart M. Hoover, *Religion in the Media Age* (London: Routledge, 2006) Kindle edition, 23.

³⁶ Robert Orsi, “Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion,” in *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*, ed. David D. Hall (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), 7-8.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 6, 8.

³⁸ David D. Hall, “Introduction,” in *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*, ed. David D. Hall (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), ix.

³⁹ Meredith B. McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 82.

specifically to their role, just as they believed a minister is called to preach. Some Baptist editors, like Leon Macon of Alabama, saw their roles as ministerial. Like a pastor, a Baptist editor had to be “morally and doctrinally correct,”⁴⁰ and he had to remain aware of “his responsibilities to God’s Word and his denomination.”⁴¹ Members of the Southern Baptist Press Association several times acknowledged the ministry aspect of their position. “Ours is not a task of technique but spiritual,” noted *The Christian Index* Editor John J. Hurt in an April 22, 1954 editorial. He had just returned from that year’s SBPA annual meeting, in which the spiritual aspect of the Baptist state newspapers had been the selected topic of study and discussion.⁴² In 1977, members of the SBPA considered themselves prophets, ministers, and “catalysts.”⁴³ For at least a few years following the Baptist Press firings, state Baptist newspaper editors believed they could be “a redemptive or prophetic voice.”⁴⁴

Not only did faith challenge their understanding of their journalistic professionalism. The denomination as an institution did, as well. Hence, lived religion is informed by discursive institutionalism. The discourse between journalists and

⁴⁰ Leon Macon, “A Marble-Matic Opinionnaire,” *The Alabama Baptist*, August 8, 1963.

⁴¹ Leon Macon, “Freedom of the Pulpit,” *The Alabama Baptist*, October 3, 1963.

⁴² Hurt, John J., “Common Concern,” *The Christian Index*, April 22, 1954.

⁴³ “Baptist Editors Protest Curbs on Press Freedom,” *The Christian Index*, Vol. 152, no. 8, March 1, 1977, quoting J. Terry Young, former editor of the *California Southern Baptist*.

⁴⁴ Southern Baptist Press Association – Annual Meeting, February 1991, Southern Baptist Press Association Records (Box 1, file 1.16). Even before the BP firings took place, some state editors were feeling pressured to report only items that presented their state conventions in a positive light. The February discussion followed presentation of two papers—one by John Roberts, editor of the South Carolina *Baptist Courier*, who asked if the papers would be “power brokers, publications of news, or tools for various political ends.” In his paper, J.B. Fowler, editor of the *Baptist New Mexican*, declared the state papers should simply focus on evangelism.

denominational leaders often was at odds, partly because of perceived differences in the definition of news, of race, and of denominational structure. At times, the two sides saw the state papers' role differently, with the editors concentrating on telling Southern Baptists what was going on within the denomination and denominational leaders being more concerned with public relations and unity. Both the denomination's institutional values, established primarily from a southern regional perspective, and the values Southern Baptist editors and journalists adopted as their news culture were tempered by lived faith. The Southern Baptist struggle to maintain unity during the study period essentially was an attempt to hold leaders and lay-members to accept historical institutional values. However, how those values were defined was a matter of interpretation. Conflict rose when the interpretation clashed, especially when both leaders and journalists defined truth, objectivity, and professionalism differently. Southern Baptist editors and journalists were caught between forces that sought to maintain the denomination's structure and those that sought to change it.⁴⁵ Both tried to define the structure, practice, and possible changes as "God-ordained" or "God-given"—as lived religion. The values SBC leaders and journalists understood and accepted differently created tension within the denomination, especially since both groups communicated those values to Southern Baptist pastors and laypeople through the denominational press.

⁴⁵ Several studies have been done on discursive institutionalism and historical institutionalism. See Vivien A. Schmidt, "Discursive institutionalism: The explanatory power of ideas and discourse," *Annual Review of Political Science* 11 (2008), 303-326, doi: 10.1146/annurev.polisci.11.060606.135342; Francisco Panizza and Romina Miorelli, "Taking discourse seriously: Discursive institutionalism and post-structuralist discourse theory," *Political Studies* 61 (2013), 301-318, doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9248.2012.00967.x; Dennis C. Grube, "Sticky words? Towards a theory of rhetorical path dependency," *Australian Journal of Political Science* 51, no. 3 (2016), 530-545; Kathleen Thelen, "Historical institutionalism in comparative politics," *Annual Review of Political Science* 2 (1999), 369-404, doi: 10.1146/annurev.polisci.2.1999.369404; and Sara Bannerman and Blayne Haggart, "Historical institutionalism in communication studies," *Communication Theory* 25 (2015), 1-22, doi: 10.1111/comt.12051.

“What ought to be” for journalists who practiced within Baptist press in the study period created conflict as some of them incorporated news values as part of their understanding of lived faith. Not only do ideology and values stem from newsroom routines and corporate economic pressures in religious media. They also come from corporate, newsroom, and individual understanding of the religious vision wrapped around the news. Those in authority determine the authenticity of the religious ideology and its components. Authenticity, then, becomes an issue of power. “The power to assign things to the category of ‘the authentic’ is the primary power that religious authorities hold.”⁴⁶ Social position and success influence the degree of religious authority recognized in an individual, group, or institution.⁴⁷ Religious authority is legitimized through performance by demonstrating it can provide practical, moral, traditional, intellectual, and spiritual benefits to adherents.⁴⁸ This study explored the ways in which conflict over perceived authority between denominational leaders and journalists, particularly during the fundamental-conservative/moderate-conservative⁴⁹ controversy of the 1970s and 1980s, influenced Baptist press professionalism.

⁴⁶ Stewart M. Hoover, “Introduction,” in *The Media and Religious Authority*, ed. Stewart M. Hoover (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2016 [Kindle Edition], 2016), location 151.

⁴⁷ P. Horsfield, “The media and religious authority from ancient to modern,” in *The Media and Religious Authority*, ed. Stewart M. Hoover (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2016 [Kindle Edition], 2016), location 914-923.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, location 993-1060.

⁴⁹ Junker (133) credits the Southern Baptist Press Association with coining the terms fundamental-conservative and moderate-conservative for the two sides in the conflict. The SBC Peace Committee “officially sanctioned the terms in 1986. Junker called the terms “instructive in the sense that virtually all Southern Baptists are conservative in the classical sense.”

Religious authority gave Baptist leaders power to try to control the denominational press. Controlling its press would have allowed denominational leaders to promote their interpretation of the Bible and their perspective on social issues. They tried to control the discourse through the organizational structure and discourse since they had the power to choose the convention's director of communications, who acted essentially as publisher for Baptist Press, the news service. SBC agencies, such as the Christian Life Commission and the home and foreign mission boards, chose to stand against the administrative discourse during the Civil Rights Movement. The agencies influenced leaders and members' understanding of race, forcing the convention to face its southern attitudes. However, during the conservative shift, agency directors and other moderate leaders were either forced out of their positions or were required to agree to accept conservative changes. Many Southern Baptist journalists had no options as conservatives pushed moderates out of the convention.

In some respects, the Southern Baptist Convention's perceived authority over its press maintained its journalists' role as prophetic, a role Vos notes as an historical role that tied the "prophet" to journalistic performance. "The prophetic role initially tightened [role and performance] from a vague, godly sounding undertaking, to a kind of journalism riddled with expressions of God's providence..."⁵⁰ Throughout the study period, the Baptist press maintained its role as prophet, a role many editors and journalists saw as central to living out their faith. They struggled with the desire to provide a product that would draw readers but without compromising the faith values

⁵⁰ Tim P. Vos, "Historical perspectives on journalistic roles," in *Journalistic Role Performance: Concepts, Contexts, and Methods*, ed. Claudia Mellado, Lea Hellmueller, and Wolfgang Donsbach (New York: Routledge, 2017), 44.

they held. Editors and journalists wanted to be seen as professional as their commercial counterparts. They saw their ministry as an extension of the church, not only to inform Southern Baptists about the functioning of their convention but also to provide them insight and information for everyday living.⁵¹ Over the years, state Baptist papers have addressed parenting, relationships, entertainment, and other life topics.

Southern Baptist journalists stressed everyday Christian living in their approach to race and the conservative shift further to the political and theological right. They sometimes appealed to readers from scripture and sometimes from pragmatism. Job loss was the primary difference in denominational reaction to journalistic changes that took place through the study period. Apparently, no Southern Baptist editor lost his job because of his beliefs about race. Several, though, lost their position for taking a centrist or moderate stand or because they were perceived as moderate or liberal.⁵²

As with their commercial counterparts, Southern Baptist journalists slowly recognized the strife between the races.⁵³ Religion has played a role in American society and culture since the country's beginning. Historian Mitchell Snay believes it contributed to the sectional division between the North and the South in the antebellum period because religion was prominent in southern society, because religious labels were used as

⁵¹ Thomas Hanitzsch and Tim P. Vos, "Journalism beyond democracy: A new look into journalistic roles in political and everyday life," *Journalism* 19, no. 2 (2018), 156-157, doi: 10.1177/1464884916673386. Hanitzsch and Vos believe commercial journalism has taken over this function from churches, schools, and other institutions. Journalism in its broadest sense provides the necessary information for everyday living, they contend.

⁵² The SBPA minutes from 1926 through the study period do not indicate any editors resigning or being fired for their stand on race. But several instances of firings over the theological and political controversy are addressed in the 1980s.

⁵³ *The Race Beat: The Press, the Civil Rights Struggle, and the Awakening of a Nation* by Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff (New York: Vintage Books, 2006) gives insight into the ways in which mainstream media changed its attitudes about and coverage of race during the Civil Rights Movement.

condemnation or blessing, and because religion and politics often supported each other on issues.⁵⁴ David Chesebrough points to the ways in which religion reinforced sectional division for political reasons and notes that differences in understanding forced the three major denominations of the period—the Presbyterian Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church, and the Baptist Church—to split on theological grounds. Some church leaders, usually characterized as northerners or abolitionists, called slavery a “sin,” and other clergy, most often described as southerners or proslavery individuals, declared that God had ordained the institution. At least some of the sectional division occurred because southern clergy believed they were defending their “divinely ordered way of life” and saw the nation as the “New Israel.”⁵⁵

Just as the Civil War itself had no single, lone cause, likely no one isolated issue, even as contentious as slavery was, caused the schisms in the Presbyterian, Methodist, and Baptist denominations that occurred in the 1830s and 1840s. The advent of the penny press improved communications between denominations and their affiliated churches and between partners in interdenominational mission efforts. People also could be more informed about the nation’s political affairs and were increasingly aware of the issues pulling at the country’s political and social fabric. Denominations and clergy took advantage of the expanded opportunities to communicate with one another and with their congregants.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Mitchell Snay, *Gospel of Disunion: Religion and Separatism in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 2-5.

⁵⁵ David B. Chesebrough, *Clergy Dissent in the Old South, 1830-1865* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996), 14-16.

⁵⁶ C.C. Goen, *Broken Churches, Broken Nation: Denominational Schisms and the Coming of the American Civil War* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1985), 9. Goen cites Henry Thomas Shanks, who

Visibility and authority became reasons why clergy and the churches were seen as partial instigators, at least, of the political and social sectional split that triggered the Civil War. Historian C.C. Goen focuses on “the way in which the division of the churches and their subsequent behavior reinforced a growing sectionalism that led eventually to political rupture and armed conflict.”⁵⁷ He interprets evangelicalism as a national unifying factor because it crossed class boundaries. That unity encompassed politics as well as being a result of evangelicalism’s call for reform, and the country tended to embrace Protestant Christian principles.

Considered a “people’s church” because the majority of members were lower class, Baptists initially opposed slavery, joining other denominations in calling for slavery to end.⁵⁸ But by 1790, discord over slavery began to emerge in state Baptist bodies. Baptists in Virginia stated their opposition to slavery in 1785, but by 1790 they were at odds with each other. The controversy heated at both state and national levels as prominent leaders and preachers took sides. Richard Furman, a South Carolina pastor and slaveholder, provided an early popular biblical defense of slavery in a sermon to that state’s legislature.⁵⁹

At the national level, the denomination relied on churches to voluntarily participate in and support three national societies: the Baptist General Tract Society, the Board of the General Missionary Convention (for foreign missions, also called the

believed that the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, used specially designed religious literature to gain sectional sympathies.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 3.

⁵⁸ Leonard, 185.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 186.

Triennial Convention), and the American Baptist Home Mission Society. The denomination dodged dealing with possible effects of slavery on its churches by hiding from the issue as long as possible. In 1833, the foreign mission society said it could not interfere in any issue not specific to its mission. Apparently, most leaders, except the abolitionists among them, agreed. The tract society moved away from the slavery issue in 1835 by telling its workers to simply keep quiet about it.⁶⁰ “The opposition to slavery that had surfaced earlier among Baptists soon declined to the point that slaveowners were not seriously discomfited in the Baptist fellowship.” Through the 1830s, the boards were encouraged to stick to dealing with missions only so that the cooperative spirit Baptists relied upon would continue.⁶¹

Missions became the focal point for the eventual schism over slavery. Sectional divisions emerged from time to time when those in the South felt the Home Mission Society was not spending as much money in the South as the southerners had been giving. Baptists in the North and the South often disagreed over how or if Baptists should be organized. As abolitionist sentiments grew among Baptists, those in the North formed the American Baptist Anti-Slavery Convention in 1840. Members proclaimed slavery a “sin” and declared they would no longer fellowship with those who owned slaves. In retaliation, southerners refused to support the mission societies they felt were insulting them and the southern way of life. In what apparently was an effort to forestall splintering within its own organization, the American Baptist Home Mission Society issued a paper

⁶⁰ Goen, 90; Leonard, 165.

⁶¹ Goen, 91.

about the danger of allowing a secular issue to bring conflict into the church and urged unity.⁶²

The General Convention in 1844 tried again to foster neutrality by declaring individuals could stand for their position but to do so outside the denomination. However, state groups pushed back. Later in 1844, Alabama Baptists asked the convention to clarify that slaveholders would have the same opportunities as non-slaveholders to be appointed as missionaries. The convention's Acting Board responded that since appointment of a slaveholder would give the denomination's tacit approval to slavery, a slaveholder would not be appointed. The Home Mission Society rejected the application of a Georgia Baptist "on the grounds that his appointment had been presented as a test case," and in 1844, passed a resolution to try to maintain its neutrality.⁶³ The Virginia Baptist Foreign Mission Society responded by calling for the formation of a new missionary organization open to individuals in both the North and the South who disagreed with the Acting Board's decision. Proslavery Baptists, mostly from the Deep South, gathered in Augusta, Georgia, on May 8, 1845, to form the Southern Baptist Convention. "[N]o one from north of Baltimore or west of New Orleans attended."⁶⁴ The new group did not reference slavery in its governing documents, focusing instead on evangelism and missions.⁶⁵

⁶² Ibid, 92-93; John R. McKivigan, "The Sectional Division of the Methodist and Baptist Denominations as Measures of Northern Antislavery Sentiment" in *Religion and the Antebellum Debate Over Slavery*, ed. John McKivigan and Mitchell Snay (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998), 349.

⁶³ Goen, 95-96; McKivigan, "Sectional Division," 350.

⁶⁴ Goen, 95-96.

⁶⁵ Leonard, 189.

Race relations remained a trigger of dissent among Baptists even after the War Between the States ended. A majority of Southern Baptists supported racial separation⁶⁶ and held onto “theologically grounded Christian racism” before and during the Civil Rights Movement.⁶⁷ According to Newman, most Southern Baptists supported “strict segregation” but they differed in how strongly they felt about it. Some supported it “unyieldingly” but “many Baptists were moderates who preferred segregation but not at the expense of social place and lawful order.” Hardliners cited the Bible, mostly Old Testament scriptures. Theological and political moderates, however, supported segregation because of “custom and an acceptance of the existing social order.” Moderates eventually accepted integration “because it posed no threat to their religious beliefs,” including their commitment to “evangelism, law and order, and public education.”⁶⁸

In spite of continued division over the issue, the convention slowly moved forward with changes, passing resolutions through the latter half of the 1940s. The convention formed a committee to study race relations and, in 1947, approved a statement of principles that included dispelling prejudice, acknowledging equality in politics and the economy, and fostering “goodwill” between the races. Leaders with Woman’s Missionary Union, an SBC women’s auxiliary that promotes mission education and support, quietly pushed for connections among black and white Baptist women.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Mark Newman, *Getting Right with God: Southern Baptists and Desegregation, 1945-1995* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2001), 20.

⁶⁷ Paul Harvey, *Freedom’s Coming: Religious Culture and the Shaping of the South from the Civil War Through the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 2.

⁶⁸ Newman, 20-21.

Federal law forced changes that slowed Baptist resistance to racial equality.⁷⁰ In the 1950s and 1960s, Southern Baptists were often seen as among southern leaders who wanted the societal structure to remain as it was. Yet, convention leaders did affirm the Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision.⁷¹ Even though affirmation came at the national level, Baptist editors remained divided over race relations, especially in the 1950s and early 1960s.⁷² The average adherent in southern congregations also opposed integration.⁷³ Even when denominational leaders began to advocate for desegregation, local pastors and churches tried to retain segregation and what they considered the "correct" social hierarchy in their communities. Many pastors and conservative politicians did not support the *Brown* ruling.⁷⁴

National legislative actions and increased violence against African Americans pushed moderate segregationists to rethink their stance. In 1961, the SBC adopted a resolution against violence. Leaders again pushed for adherents to obey the law, with the passage of national civil rights legislation. SBC missionaries also increased their

⁶⁹ Harvey, 74-75. Many women leaders were among Baptists who pushed for equality. Annie Armstrong, a key figure in WMU's founding, helped Nannie Burroughs start the Women's Convention, similar to WMU, as an auxiliary to the National Baptist Convention, a black Baptist body. As part of her ministry, Burroughs collaborated with Una Roberts Lawrence, a WMU leader and a member of the federal government's Committee on Farm Security. The two women started the *Worker*, "a quarterly publication that promoted contacts between white and black Baptist women."

⁷⁰ Newman, 209.

⁷¹ David Stricklin, *A Genealogy of Dissent: Southern Baptist Protest in the Twentieth Century* (Lexington: University of Press of Kentucky, 1999), 49-50.

⁷² *Alabama Baptist* Editor Leon Macon, a segregationist, declared that, while an editor was not to "close his mind to the view of others," he was responsible to decline to run items from those who differed with his views, "because in our judgment they would do more harm than good" (Macon, *The Alabama Baptist*, "Freedom of the Pulpit", October 3, 1963).

⁷³ Newman, 209.

⁷⁴ Harvey, 229-230.

insistence that Southern Baptists foster integration because they saw the “danger of racism to missions.” Newman argues that Southern Baptists also turned away from segregation because of progressives’ “ongoing educational campaign.” The SBC adopted resolutions in 1969, 1970, and 1971 that “commended open churches and condemned racial prejudice.”⁷⁵ Flowers believes that by 1970 race “ceased to be a divisive issue” and gender issues took its place.⁷⁶ Though race relations no longer was among primary concerns, leaders, by resolution in 1995, officially denounced racism and apologized to African Americans “for condoning and/or perpetuating individual and systemic racism” and “genuinely repent[ed] of racism of which [Southern Baptists] have been guilty.”⁷⁷

Even as racial tensions mounted and then began to subside, a strong undercurrent of conflict between Baptists—those who considered themselves fundamentalist-conservative and those who considered themselves moderate-conservative, theologically and politically—had been building since 1925. A smaller group of Southern Baptists held to theologically and politically progressive views and was often labeled as liberals. Ammerman argues that the theologically conservative/fundamental makeup of the SBC by 1990 followed fundamentalism’s historic roots. In the nineteenth century, “ordinary believers” became fundamentalists as their faith was challenged by liberalism and the social gospel. “They intentionally organized against a real threat to what they believed—the threat and the organization are what distinguish fundamentalists from ordinary

⁷⁵ Newman, 27-30.

⁷⁶ Elizabeth H. Flowers, *Into the Pulpit: Southern Baptist Women and Power Since World War II*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 4.

⁷⁷ Southern Baptist Convention, “Resolution on Racial Reconciliation on the 150th Anniversary of the Southern Baptist Convention,” www.sbc.net/resolutions/899/resolution-on-racial-reconciliation-on-the-150th-anniversary-of-the-southern-baptist-convention.

believers or traditionalists.” Those conservatives in the late twentieth century who “perceived a clear threat in their denomination and ... organized against it ... fall into the fundamentalist historical pattern.”⁷⁸ Although fundamentalism rose from time to time within the southern denomination, it seemed to strengthen with J. Frank Norris and his followers in the 1920s. Ammerman attributes the SBC’s “denominational and cultural homogeneity” for keeping the fundamentalists mostly at bay during what the fundamentalists perceived as a modernist surge. “Not enough modernists” populated the SBC “to generate a good fight.” Although most Southern Baptists discounted Norris’ brand of fundamentalism, it began to get a foothold.⁷⁹

Two SBC internal changes shifted its focus from its southern roots. Southerners began moving north and west during the Great Depression, and Southern Baptists often started churches as they settled. Agreements, which delineated the territory in which each could work, had been in place between the Southern and Northern conventions since the early 1900s. In 1950, the Northern Convention became the American Baptist Convention, and the SBC “dropped all pretense of territorial civility. The entire nation would be official Southern Baptist territory.”⁸⁰ Secondly, in the 1940s, Southern Baptist leaders formed an agency to develop ministries to address social problems, a move Ammerman considers marked the SBC’s turn from a strictly regional body to one with a national focus.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Baptist Battles: Social Change and Religious Conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 16.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 48-49.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 51.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, 57.

That broader connection to society led fundamentalists to believe they needed to “maintain the truth of the Bible” as “spiritual survival” and to begin calling the theology of moderate leaders into question and challenging Southern Baptists to declare the Bible as infallible.⁸² Societal upheaval in the 1960s and early 1970s solidified the conservatives’ contention that the United States had become liberal and secularized, and they charged that the SBC Christian Life Commission and other agencies were following the trend. The CLC hosted a seminar that included a representative from *Playboy* magazine.⁸³ The theologically conservative group could not change the SBC in the late 1950s, the 1960s, and early 1970s because “younger Baptists ... continued to be nurtured by their commitments to progressive change within the denomination.”⁸⁴ Many of those baby boomers, though, joined the theologically and politically conservative movement. By the late 1970s, the fundamental-conservative faction had enough support to begin securing leadership positions.⁸⁵ Harvey sees the hard-right shift as evidence that the fundamental-conservative group had a “single-minded” goal of inerrancy and literal interpretation, while the moderate-conservative/progressive group did not state a clear goal around which people could rally.⁸⁶

The fundamental-conservatives created newsjournals—*Southern Baptist Advocate*, *Southern Baptist Journal*, and others—to challenge the established Baptist

⁸² Ibid, 63.

⁸³ Ibid, 68.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 66.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 67-69.

⁸⁶ Harvey, 248.

press.⁸⁷ Although conservatives effectively used mass media, moderate Baptists got most of their news from denominational sources through the mid-1980s. The SBC's news service, Baptist Press, was "among the most respected denominational news operations in the country," even though fundamentalists saw it as the "mouthpiece of the bureaucrats."⁸⁸ Conservatives were convinced that Baptist Press and the state Baptist newspapers focused on the conservative movement as a political fight and completely ignored the theological issues in the late 1980s. One leader called the Baptist media the "main political problem."⁸⁹

By 1990, conservatives stepped up their complaints that Baptist Press had no balance in its coverage. Ronnie Floyd, as SBC leader and pastor of First Baptist Church of Springdale, Arkansas, called Baptist Press journalists' integrity into question. He wrote that "God has called Baptist Press to a 'higher set of standards' than the press of America" and that "harmony" should be the news service's goal. The complaints led to the firing of Shackelford and Martin.⁹⁰ Southern Baptist journalism slowly took on a more public relations feel as state editors in place during the SBC's more "moderate" years retired or were forced out of their positions and replaced with more conservative counterparts.

Baptist journalism in the U.S. has been in flux since its beginnings—from its extension of the ministry of pastors and leaders who saw the press as a means to reach

⁸⁷ Ammerman, 185-186.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 185-187.

⁸⁹ Jerry Sutton, *The Baptist Reformation: The Conservative Resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention* (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 441, 451.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 395-398.

people and its desire to contribute to society. The Southern Baptist press often was overlooked or deemed inferior to commercial newspapers. However, even in the face of disagreement, the Southern Baptist Press Association and its members were concerned about professionalism and quality. They often sought professional outsiders (professors and mainstream editors) to provide training and to critique their newspapers.⁹¹ They sought professionalization, even when professionalization clashed with the interpretation of personal and denominational values.

This study contributes to media history because the religious press was important to the development of mass communications as an industry. The study points out that the Protestant press continued to contribute to journalism and to society, even after journalism took a more commercial approach, beginning in the 1830s. It sheds light on the approach the Protestant press took to reach a form of professionalization and how internal denominational forces helped and hampered professionalization efforts. Although limited to Baptist press professional development, this study is a first step to exploring the professionalization of other faith traditions and for comparing them. I have relied on archives, including the Southern Baptist Press Association minutes and the papers of denominational leaders and journalists, on stories about the SPBA meetings and editorials in *The Christian Index*, and interviews with seven individuals who served as editors during the study period. I examined issues of *The Christian Index* from 1954 to 1990 because it is the oldest, continuously published Baptist newspaper in the U.S. Also,

⁹¹ SPBA minutes document several occasions when working journalists and professors, including R.E. Wolseley of the Medill School of Journalism in the 1940s and 1950s, critiqued the papers. At least once (1954-1955), SBPA members drew the name of another's paper and examined each issue released for a year. Each participant offered a written appraisal and a five-minute critique of the chosen newsjournal at the 1955 annual meeting.

the paper was (and continues to be) operated from the Atlanta, Georgia-area (specifically Athens) throughout the study period. Baptist leaders in the South gathered in Augusta, Georgia, to form the Southern Baptist Convention. Atlanta was the site of important meetings of Black leaders of the Civil Rights era, and Martin Luther King, Sr. served as a pastor in Atlanta. Jack Harwell, *Christian Index* editor in the 1980s, was among the first to lose his position as conservatives gained political control of the SBC.⁹² In addition, moderate leaders within the Southern Baptist Convention met there to determine their options and eventually formed the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship as an alternative to continued participation in the SBC.⁹³

Chapter 1 examines the idea of journalism as calling, both secular and religious, and the concept of call to journalism as specific ministry and as obedience to God. It also takes a brief look at the formation of some early U.S. religious publication associations. Chapter 2 considers Southern Baptist Convention identity, governance, and the creation and growth of Baptist journalistic identity. It points out how the governance structure, particularly the SBC's emphasis on cooperation and unity, affected its journalism. This chapter also examines the understanding of truth, unity, and community.

⁹² Southern Baptist Press Association – Annual Meeting – 1988, Southern Baptist Press Association Records (Box 1, file 1.13).

⁹³ The SBC has produced a nationally circulated newspaper/magazine since 1923, but I chose not to use it for this study because it is a house organ, created primarily to promote the SBC and its affiliated agencies and institutions. I examined the first two to three issues of each as the name changed. The newspaper started as *Campaign Talking Points* on September 15, 1923. Sent to preachers only, it pushed for more gifts to the 75 Million Campaign, a five-year funding plan that ended in 1924. Because only \$44 million had been raised by May 1, 1923, the newspaper was used to tell stories from each agency that would benefit from the campaign, especially the missions and benevolence agencies. After the SBC developed its current funding plan, the Cooperative Program, in 1925, the Executive Committee changed the newspaper's name to *The Baptist Program* on February 16 that year. Again, it promoted agency programs through feature stories and was targeted to pastors and state denominational workers. It became *SBC Life* in 1993. Begun by moderates, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship has not declared separate denominational status. However, it does not claim affiliation with the SBC, and the SBC does not recognize it.

Chapter 3 discusses the creation of Baptist Press, the denomination's news service, its bureau chief system, the unsuccessful moves to make BP a separate entity, and BP's role as a denominational gatekeeper in the study period. The chapter examines the shift in professionalization with the founding of the Baptist Public Relations Association, and the differences in understanding of press freedom and the social responsibility of the denomination and of its journalism. Chapter 4 examines the effect of the Civil Rights Movement on Baptist journalism, and Chapter 5 looks at the effect of the SBC's fundamental-conservative/moderate-conservative clash on the denomination's journalism. Both chapters 4 and 5 consider how the concept of lived religion shaped journalists and denominational leaders' understanding of the press' role. The two chapters examine how the Southern Baptist Press Association and the state papers defined themselves to themselves and to the public during and in the aftermath of each event, how their roles and values changed, and how their journalism changed.

CHAPTER 1

Journalism as Calling

Lived religion often plays out in occupational choices. Evangelicals interpret that choice as God's specific calling to a specific vocation. The belief that God had called Southern Baptist editors to their position deeply affected the professionalization process of the denomination's press.

The term "calling" has been used to describe passion for a job or work as a means to serve society, divorcing religion from its meaning. Over the years, mainstream journalists have been encouraged to consider their profession as more than production of a product to "a calling demanding the best of its practitioners."⁹⁴ Some describe the feeling of being in a job for a reason, a purpose. Others see it as fulfillment or the privilege of loving what they do.⁹⁵ Some individuals believe that what they do contributes to the greater good, that they make a difference to society through their vocation.⁹⁶

Although "calling" is applied broadly to vocational choice and other aspects of life, it holds deeper spiritual meaning for those who believe a divine being guides or directs life. Evangelicals tend to stress a hierarchy of types of calling, with the calling to religious vocations such as preacher and missionary as the most noble. Although some

⁹⁴ "What should the journalists' movement stand for?" *Columbia Journalism Review* 12, no. 4, (Nov/Dec 1973): 5-6.

⁹⁵ Michael Horvath, "Predicting Work Outcomes From Religiosity and Perceived Calling," *The Career Development Quarterly* 63 (June 2013): 141-155, doi: 10.1002/cdq.12010; Homero Gil de Zúñiga and Amber Hinsley, "The Press Versus the Public: What is 'good journalism?'" *Journalism Studies* 14, no. 6: 926-942, doi: 10.1080/1461670X.2012.744551; Melanie Sill, "We Define Journalism By Doing It," *Nieman Reports* (Winter 2004): 55.

⁹⁶ James A. Swezey, "Higher education: Faculty sense of religious calling at a Christian university," *Journal of Research on Christian Education* 18 (2009): 317-318, doi: 10.1080/10656210903333400.

scholars and Protestant leaders have attempted to broaden the understanding of religious call, the concept among Southern Baptists still retains a hierarchy. Also, calling is defined as personal and subjective. Although an individual's understanding or interpretation of what he or she perceives as a call from God can be questioned, the call itself cannot. "Being called is more intuitive than analytic no matter how much data you collect.... No amount of reasoning replaces the heartfelt conviction that God is calling you," Jeff Iorg, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Gateway Seminary, notes.⁹⁷ He defines call as "a profound impression from God that establishes parameters for your life and can be altered only by a subsequent, superseding impression from God."⁹⁸ Iorg declares that a call is different from God's "prompting, leading, directing, showing, and urging," that it is "a rare event" with "long-lasting results."⁹⁹ I have used Iorg primarily because he expresses the concept of calling as most Southern Baptist leaders and laypeople understand it.

Iorg outlines three types of religious calling—a universal call to service for all Christians, a general call of individuals to ministry, and a specific call "to a unique ministry assignment or a particular ministry position."¹⁰⁰ Ministry and service for most

⁹⁷ Jeff Iorg, *Is God Calling Me? Answering the Question Every Believer Asks* (Nashville, Tenn.: B&H Publishing Group, 2008), 9.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 9, 10. Also see Roland Riem, "Why calling matters more: Weighing vocational and competency approaches to ministerial development," *British Journal of Theological Education* 14, no. 1 (2003): 78-92. Riem emphasizes calling as a process, rather than as a revelation. Drawing from Foucault, Jennifer A. Scott points to the effect of organizational spirituality on individual understanding of calling. She argues that discursive positioning of the individual among the people and entities that co-construct the narrative of the individual's life help write the calling narrative the individual may perceive. See Jennifer A. Scott, "Our callings, our selves: Repositioning religious and entrepreneurial discourse in career theory and practice," *Communication Studies* 58, no. 3 (September 2007): 261-279.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 18. Iorg sees the universal call to service as a framework for lived religion in each Christian's vocation or workplace. He believes Christians can interpret the universal call as a calling to a specific

Christians is expressed through living out their faith in daily activity. He declares that “God wants *most* believers employed secularly, living the gospel among the people with whom they work.” The commercial workplace becomes an avenue of Christian service. Iorg separates the universal call to service from call to ministry vocation by naming the other two forms as calls to “ministry leadership.” He and most Southern Baptists believe “[a] clear sense of call is necessary for anyone who assumes a ministry-leadership position in a church or Christian organization.”¹⁰¹

Journalism professors at religious universities during the study period supported the concept of writing as an expression of religious calling. In 1964, David A. Cheavens, then chairman of Baylor University’s department of journalism, saw calling as God’s choice. Acknowledging the “considerable theological concern” the concept attracted, the professor declared “that the matter seems to be very well covered when each of us realizes that we are here because God put us here.” God gave each person talents and the responsibility to use them, and all “real” Christians would dedicate all their “talents...time...[and] energy to God.”¹⁰² Telling Southern Baptist Press Association members in 1964 that they had a special calling, Journalism Department Chair Wayne Rowland, of Texas Christian University, added that they were “very much a part of

vocation other than ministry when that vocation is the “center of God’s plan for your life” (21). He explains the other two types of call as ministry related. Douglas J. Schuurman, however, believes Protestant history describes “calling” and “vocation” synonymously. He does not see calling as “an extraordinary, miraculous event.” Instead, he sees calling as lived religion, as Christian service regardless of life circumstances. “God does sometimes call in ... extraordinary ways, but for the vast majority of Christians God’s callings are discerned quietly, when the heart of faith joins opportunities and gifts with the needs of others.” Vocation has the power “to infuse all of life with religious meaning...” (3-4). See Douglas J. Schuurman, *Vocation: Discerning Our Callings in Life* (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004).

¹⁰¹ Iorg, 21-22, 27.

¹⁰² David A. Cheavens, “The Ministry of Writing,” (presentation, Southern Baptist Press Association annual meeting, Houston, Texas, February 10, 1964), 1. Southern Baptist Press Association (Minutes and Papers), Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives.

professional journalism and mass communications.” He believed God called religious journalists so that they would “sound...the call” to others on the Creator’s behalf.¹⁰³ Even three professors, asked to evaluate Baptist Press news service in 1985, referred to calling, both in journalism and faith terms. “The news must be reported. To report that news, as promptly as possible, is the journalist’s calling—his stewardship, in the faith.”¹⁰⁴

Journalists as Ministers

Most members of the Southern Baptist Press Association saw themselves as ministers through journalism.¹⁰⁵ Three editors, who worked with the denominational press during at least part of the study period, each interpreted his call from slightly different perspectives.

For Toby Druin, associate editor and then editor at the Texas *Baptist Standard* from 1976 to 1998, calling was a process that began with commercial journalism. A sports editor and then city editor in Borger, Texas, in the late 1950s, he felt God wanted him in religious ministry. But Druin confessed he believed calling meant becoming a pastor, church musician, or missionary. Because he did not want to move his family, he

¹⁰³ Wayne Roland, “The Challenge of Christian Journalism in the Changing World” (presentation, Southern Baptist Press Association annual meeting, Houston, Texas, February 11, 1964), 1, 5. Southern Baptist Press Association (Minutes and Papers), Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives.

¹⁰⁴ Clifford Christians, John DeMott, and John Merrill, “Report of Special Inquiry: Performance of the Baptist Press in news coverage of controversy over taping of Pressler/Durham telephone conversation and related matters” (Report to the Southern Baptist Press Association, February 5, 1985). At the time, Christians was an associate professor at the University of Illinois and was widely known as a “leading authority” on journalism ethics. He had an earned doctorate in communications and a degree in theology from Fuller Seminary. DeMott was chair of the department of journalism at Memphis State University. He was part of the committee that developed a code of ethics for Associated Press editors and for Associated Church Press. A journalism professor at Louisiana State University, Merrill had been dean of the LSU journalism school. All three were “men of faith,” with Merrill and DeMott as Baptists and Christians in the “Reform tradition,” according to Bobby S. Terry, then-SBPA president-elect, in a preface to the report.

¹⁰⁵ The Southern Baptist Convention Proceedings for the study period indicate that most editors had been pastors or had been or were SBC leaders. Many associate editors were trained journalists and/or had commercial journalism experience. Some, but not all, associate editors also had seminary training.

resisted leaving journalism. Finally, he acquiesced, choosing to pursue training in music at Wayland Baptist University. To support his family, he reported for the Plainview (Texas) *Daily Herald* (near Amarillo). In 1961, he learned that Baylor University was to begin a religious journalism sequence. Believing God wanted him to minister through religious journalism, Druin was accepted into the Baylor program and became night managing editor at the Waco (Texas) *News Tribune*, where he stayed a few months before becoming a writer in Baylor's public relations office. After he graduated, the university created the position of news service director for him. He began his career with state Baptist newspapers as associate editor of North Carolina's *Biblical Recorder* in 1966. "Religious journalists understand calling," he said. "It's an experiential thing.... Once I turned toward journalism, it's amazing how doors opened."¹⁰⁶ Opportunities became available to him through the denomination.

Although Louis Moore, former religion editor at the *Houston Chronicle*, believes God clearly called him to religious journalism, he admits he made some career choices for pragmatic reasons. A journalism major as an undergraduate student at Baylor University, he remained for a year of graduate study to be editor of the student newspaper. Offered jobs as news director at both Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, and Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, he chose Southern. He attended seminary specifically "to acquire background knowledge to become a religious journalist." But exposure to denominational procedures, particularly to efforts to stifle stories unflattering to the SBC or its agencies,

¹⁰⁶ Personal interview, Dallas, Texas, August 14, 2018, and "Toby Druin: 'An informed Baptist is a better Baptist,'" *Baptist Standard*, February 28, 2018. <https://www.baptiststandard.com/opinion/profiles/toby-druin-informed-baptist-better-baptist/>

convinced him God was calling him to religion writing and editing for commercial media. “The more I thought about it and the more I looked around the denomination, the more I concluded that freedom of the press and speech were simply not possible inside the SBC. I could not be a ‘witness to the truth’ under such circumstances.”¹⁰⁷

He accepted the *Houston Chronicle* post in 1972, but cutbacks in religion sections at major U.S. newspapers in the 1980s forced Moore to reexamine his call. Entering denominational journalism “was a very pragmatic decision.” Tired of covering the Southern Baptist conservative-moderate controversy, he left the *Chronicle* in 1986 for a newspaper in Plano, Texas. Downsizing there cost him his post, and after eighteen jobless months, he accepted a media position with the Southern Baptist Convention Christian Life Commission. He turned down an opportunity to join the Oklahoma bureau of the *Dallas Morning News*. “I came to the conclusion that I was not called to totally secular journalism,” he said.¹⁰⁸ However, in his autobiography Moore hints that God’s will was at work. Noting that he was criticized for accepting a denominational position, he declared that “given the secular newspaper world of which I was a part, God was using those circumstances to point me to a career inside the SBC.” Moore argued that his commercial newspaper experience and the fact that he had friends in both camps would have allowed him to “bridge the gap between moderates and conservatives” in Nashville if they would have allowed him to do so.¹⁰⁹ He believed God later called him to accept the post as associate vice president for communications of the SBC International Mission

¹⁰⁷ Louis Moore, *Witness to the Truth: Lessons learned by a veteran journalist through four decades of watching the church* (Garland, Texas: Hannibal Books, 2008), 58-66.

¹⁰⁸ Louis Moore, personal interview, Garland, Texas, August 14, 2018.

¹⁰⁹ Moore, 227-228.

Board, the agency responsible to coordinate overseas mission efforts, and then as special assistant to the IMB president.¹¹⁰

Considered a progressive Baptist, Walker L. Knight served the denomination as a journalist throughout the entire study period and is credited with pushing Southern Baptists on race and other social issues.¹¹¹ He sees journalism as a “gift from God” and his call as a combination of spiritual prompting and personal desire to become a journalist. The 95-year-old credits his father’s influence as a newspaperman in Henderson, Kentucky, for his strong desire to become a journalist. He had watched his father work and had assisted while growing up. But as a teenager, Knight felt God calling him to vocational ministry. Because Knight was uncertain about the direction his ministry should take, his Baptist church experience led him to interpret the call to mean the pastorate. “What had happened was that what once had been but a slight impression had gradually become a whisper and finally a strong urge. Had there not been a set pattern to follow I might not have responded as I did, and even then it was still an uncertain path.” He described the feeling as “a sense of giving in” and that “the decision would stay with me for the rest of my life,” even though his interpretation of it changed.¹¹² For nine months while an undergraduate student at Baylor, he served as a pastor in Dale, 140 miles away. That experience convinced him that he would not fulfill his call as a pastor because he did not feel competent. After graduating from Baylor in 1950 with a major in

¹¹⁰ Louis Moore, personal interview, Garland, Texas, August 14, 2018.

¹¹¹ A number of people, primarily moderate-conservatives and progressive Baptists, wrote tributes to Knight for various functions, including his retirement. Most referenced his time at the SBC Home Mission Board and his efforts to push Southern Baptists to change attitudes about race. He was awarded the William H. Whitsitt Courage Award from the Whitsitt Baptist Heritage Society in 2002 for his work.

¹¹² Walker L. Knight, *From Zion to Atlanta Memoirs* (Macon, Ga.: Nurturing Faith, Inc., 2013), 76.

Bible and a minor in journalism, he became editor of *The Falls County Record* in Marlin, Texas (near Waco), where he had been working part-time while a student. But a few months later, he accepted the associate editor post at the Texas *Baptist Standard* owned by the Baptist General Convention of Texas in Dallas. "...Nell [his wife] and I saw this as clearly the leading of the Spirit of God in our lives.... Looking back I could trace those moments and decisions, at times seemingly not too significant, that determined the direction of my life."¹¹³ He served the *Standard* for ten years, where he pushed himself to "be the best journalist I could be."¹¹⁴ Part of that desire to push himself was driven by his perception that mainstream news organizations did not consider religious journalists as professionals. "For many, the term 'religious journalist' meant a quality lower than the secular journalist, implying that one became a religious journalist when he or she could not make the grade elsewhere," he wrote.¹¹⁵

Then in 1959, he became secretary of the editorial department at the SBC Home (now North American) Mission Board, the agency responsible for mission work within the United States. His news background convinced Baptist Press to make his department one of its regional news bureaus.¹¹⁶ Among the first denominational journalists to have earned a journalism degree, Knight decided God had given him "a gift of journalism" and had called him to the profession. "I saw journalism as a tool that could be used to bring about God's will and the will of other people." The pastor of Zion Baptist Church in

¹¹³ Ibid, 154.

¹¹⁴ Walker L. Knight, personal interview, Atlanta, Ga., October 15, 2018.

¹¹⁵ Knight, 157.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 183, 193.

Zion, Kentucky, where Knight grew up, helped dispel Knight's initial doubts about God's call to religious journalism. "I saw in his life that journalism had two sides. I wanted to be on the side that would most benefit from the skills and the truth God has given me," Knight explained.¹¹⁷

As the fundamental-conservative/moderate-conservative split among Southern Baptists widened in the 1980s, moderates talked of creating an autonomous national Baptist newspaper. *SBC Today* (renamed *Baptists Today* in 1991) launched with its first issue in April 1983, with Knight as editor. Jack Harwell, who, under pressure from conservatives, had been pushed to resign as editor¹¹⁸ at the Georgia Baptist *Christian Index*, took over as *SBC Today* editor in early 1988 and Knight was named publisher and then publisher emeritus on his retirement in February 1989.¹¹⁹

Caught in the middle of the fundamental-conservative / moderate-conservative struggle, Dan Martin had considerable experience with mainstream newspapers before taking the news editor's position with Baptist Press. He was a reporter for the Fort Worth

¹¹⁷ Walker Knight, personal interview, Atlanta, Ga., October 15, 2018.

¹¹⁸ Harwell was a controversial figure during both the Civil Rights Movement and the SBC conservative shift. William "Bill" Teal, who served as associate editor through part of Harwell's tenure, noted in Harwell's obituary that the longtime editor offered to resign and take early retirement from *The Christian Index* in 1987. Although messengers (delegates) to the Georgia Baptist Convention's annual meeting in November that year asked Harwell to remain as editor, the convention's executive committee voted in a closed meeting "not to reconsider his resignation and he was forced into retirement" at the end of the year. See Harwell's obituary on the Nurturing Faith (formerly *Baptists Today*) website at <https://www.nurturingfaith.net/john-pierce-blog/editor-emeritus-jack-u-harwell-86-led-two-baptist-publications/>. The story does not give the year, but Harwell passed away January 18, 2019, with the story posted the following day.

¹¹⁹ Knight, 201. Knight wrote that he told the *SBC Today* board in the fall of 1987 that he planned to retire at 65 in February 1989. Yet, he also wrote that the March 1987 *SBC Today* issue announced Harwell's acceptance. Apparently, he should have written that the announcement was made in March 1988. SPBA minutes in 1988 included a resolution of affirmation of Harwell, noting that he became editor of *SBC Today* on June 1 that year. The publication became *Nurturing Faith* in 2016, a monthly available in print and online (<https://www.nurturingfaith.net>). However, its brief historical notes on the website do not clarify when Harwell became editor. He was editor emeritus until his death on January 18, 2019.

(Texas) *Star-Telegram*, the *Dallas Morning News*, and the *Denver Rocky Mountain News*. He was part of the team at the *Dallas Morning News* to cover the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. “I did every job, except as the top guy,” Martin said.¹²⁰

Martin considered himself the stereotypical “drunk newsman,” even though he had attended church services as a youngster.¹²¹ In 1966, he had a “powerful spiritual experience” in Denver and wanted to write for a religious organization. He was hired by the communication department of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, the state Southern Baptist organization, in 1973. “It was a real opportunity to intersect my faith and my journalism,” he said. “I wanted to be a writer since I was eight years old.” At every mainstream newspaper for which he worked, he held to a strong sense of personal and journalistic integrity. “I didn’t want to do anything that would reflect poorly on our paper,” he said. “So, when I went to work for Southern Baptists, I wanted to write great stories about missionaries and their work.”¹²²

While in Denver, Martin said he “made no secret that I was a Christian. I made no secret that I was a journalist of integrity. I felt there was no difference.” He remained in Texas until 1976, when he was asked to work with Walker Knight at the SBC Home Mission Board. After four years at the HMB, he was hired as news editor at Baptist Press. Martin maintained his commitment to integrity, fairness, and accurate journalism in spite of increased pressure from the fundamental-conservative faction. When he was fired from

¹²⁰ Dan Martin, phone interview, April 12, 2019.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

Baptist Press, Martin said he “felt like a chicken with its head cut off. I felt I was born for the job at Baptist Press, but [Judge Paul] Pressler decided God was mistaken.”¹²³

SBPA and Journalism Calling

Regardless of the manner in which they felt called, most Southern Baptist Press Association members believed God had placed them in their editorial or communications positions. For example, the association’s 1957 annual meeting included a lecture titled “Writing for Christ’s Sake.”¹²⁴ David A. Cheavens, chairman of Baylor University’s journalism department, presented a paper on writing as ministry in 1964.¹²⁵ The 1977 annual session centered on the theme, “Baptist State Papers: Voices or Echoes?” and included a talk on Baptist editors’ “higher responsibility is prophetic,” rather than promotion.¹²⁶ In 1979, John E. Roberts, then SBPA president and editor of the South Carolina Baptist state paper, stressed the editors had to defend their newsjournals. They only had two options—become “a mere promotional sheet” or accept their “responsibility of being prophet and proclaimer....Ours is indeed a high calling.”¹²⁷ Lonnie Wilkey, editor of the *Baptist & Reflector* (Tennessee Baptist state paper) and association president in 2004, “emphasized the call of God to editors.”¹²⁸ In 2005, then SPBA president Trennis Henderson spoke on two questions: “Where are you in your ministry

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ SBPA – Annual Meeting – 1957, Southern Baptist Press Association Records (Box 1, file 1.56).

¹²⁵ David A. Cheavens, “The Ministry of Writing,” paper presented to the Southern Baptist Press Association, February 10, 1964. SBPA Minutes and Papers, Papers Presented, 1962-64.

¹²⁶ SBPA – Annual Meeting – 1977, Southern Baptist Press Association Records (Box 2, file 2.2).

¹²⁷ John E. Roberts, “President’s Address,” presented to the Southern Baptist Press Association, Anchorage, Alaska, February 14, 1979. Fields Papers (Box 97, file 97.10).

¹²⁸ Association of State Baptist Papers Minutes and Papers, 2005.

pilgrimage?” and “Where is the press association?” His remarks suggested both the editors and the association were as much God’s messengers as were pastors.¹²⁹ Most SBPA meetings before 1970 included a session on the state papers as promoters of God’s will. Those sessions suggested a range of pastoral-like functions, including interpreting doctrine, explaining God’s will in the world, and editorial suggestions for laity response to a variety of social issues, among others.

After 1970, meeting emphases shifted toward press freedom, openness of denominational and agency meetings, and training in journalism skills, until the early 1990s when discussions returned to a ministry focus. Even though the primary topics at meetings centered on press issues during those twenty years, members were reminded of their ministry function. In 1973, SBC Christian Life Commission Director Foy Valentine addressed editors about social issues, and California state newspaper, the *California Southern Baptist*, Editor J. Terry Young reminded members that they had three major roles as editors—“the role of the prophet, the role of the minister, and the role of the catalyst.”¹³⁰

W.C. Fields, SBC public relations secretary/vice president and director of Baptist Press, the SBC’s news service, from 1959 to 1987, believed denominational journalists had be proficient in both theology and journalism. “Baptist journalists including staff members of state publications should be professionally competent and spiritually mature. Whether you graft theology on to the journalism tree or graft journalism on to the

¹²⁹ Association of State Baptist Papers Minutes and Papers, 2006.

¹³⁰ Fields Papers (Box 96, file 96.62) and “Baptist Editors Protest Restrictions on Press Freedom” in the Baptist Press February 19, 1973 news packet (Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives digital resources, http://www.sbhla.org/bp_archive/index.asp.)

theology tree, Baptist paper personnel need to move with authority in both fields,” he responded to a graduate student’s survey in 1976.¹³¹

Fields highlighted editors with a six-page spread—“Mr. Baptist Editor, Why Are You an Editor?”—in the September 1974 issue of *The Baptist Program*, an SBC house organ aimed at pastors and lay-leaders.¹³² Several editors responded with a spiritual reason. Frank Cooper, then editor of the state paper, *Florida Baptist Witness*, noted, “To me, being an editor means serving Christ.... I am not out of the ministry, but just in another angle of the work.” Then *Rocky Mountain Baptist* (the Colorado state paper) Editor O.L. Bayless believed religious journals touched people as did the church. “Such journals are pulpits that preach day and night,” he said. The *Pacific Coast Baptist* was “ministry in a very realistic form” for Editor C.E. Boyle, and *California Southern Baptist* Editor Elmer L. Gray believed God had called him “into a writing ministry.”¹³³

Calling Despite Controversy

The editors emphasized what they perceived as their spiritual role from time to time from 1980 to 1990 as a means of dealing with the brewing controversy surrounding Baptist Press and state papers as the more conservative faction vied for control of the national denominational body. All Southern Baptist Press Association annual meetings generally began with a devotional. For example, *Arkansas Baptist* Editor Everett Sneed

¹³¹ Letter from W.C. Fields to Charles R. Richardson, January 19, 1976. Fields Papers (Box 34, file 34.5). Richardson was associate editor at the Texas *Baptist Standard*, who conducted a survey among state Baptist editors for a paper on the future of state Baptist publications for a graduate journalism course.

¹³² *The Baptist Program* began as *Campaign Talking Points* on September 15, 1923, as an effort to promote increased gifts to a five-year funding plan that ended in 1924. Retaining its promotional tone, it was renamed *The Baptist Program* in 1925, and became *SBC Life* in 1993.

¹³³ “Mr. Baptist Editor, Why Are You an Editor?” *The Baptist Program*, September 1974, Southern Baptist Press Association Records, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Nashville, Tenn.

used the New Testament book of Romans to talk about the “journalist’s abode, attitude and access” at the SBPA 1981 annual meeting. Each editor had to “abide in policies” to handle the pressure of individuals within the denomination who wanted to use the editor and the paper for “private purposes.” Each editor had to adopt an appropriate attitude. He “should exemplify patience . . . especially with those people who are trying to pressure the editor into conforming to their will.” He “should also reflect hope, hope for the denomination, even when dealing with negative issues.” Sneed appealed to living religion with his last point—an appeal for each editor to turn to their faith. Each had access to “God’s grace and God’s Holy Spirit who can bring peace in the midst of the storm.”¹³⁴ At the SBPA’s February 1991 annual meeting that year, Fletcher Allen of Tennessee, the association’s newly elected president, affirmed and “encouraged the editors in their special calling.”¹³⁵

A source of fellowship for the state paper editors, the SBPA became a means for Southern Baptist editors to graft spirituality and journalism by providing training to develop journalism skills, including editorial writing, circulation and subscriptions, and relationships with pastors and denominational leaders.¹³⁶ From 1926 through the 1970s, specific training sessions, especially summer workshops, shifted from ministry function toward emphasis on journalism skills. Even after meeting discussions began emphasizing

¹³⁴ Fields Papers, Southern Baptist Press Association – 1981 (Box 97, file 97.12).

¹³⁵ Southern Baptist Press Association Records, SBPA Annual Meeting – 1991 (Box 1, file 1.16).

¹³⁶ Junker, 43. Junker bases his list of topics covered in the early years on reports in a few state papers before 1926, especially the Tennessee *Baptist and Reflector*, the Virginia Baptist *Religious Herald*, and the Texas *Baptist Standard*. SBPA minutes and records indicate that although circulation and finances were constant topics of study, members sought training in all journalistic aspects. They often touched on issues surrounding denominational relationships and the appropriateness of reporting negative news.

calling and ministry again, training continued. Members wanted both to fulfill their ministry calling while developing professionally, even though many felt religious publications were not considered as professional as their mainstream counterparts. “It always chafed...that we were not accepted by the secular media as we accepted them,” noted Norman Jameson, Baptist Press feature editor from 1977 to 1982.¹³⁷

Lost Prestige

Part of that loss of acceptance was a result of changes in society over time. Austin points out that religious publications lost some of their authority as preachers and their sermons lost general appeal and literary writers found other outlets for their work besides the church. “The words of sermons thundering across the pews from the pulpit of a Cotton Mather or Lyman Beecher burst through the church doors and into the streets through newspapers and magazines....”¹³⁸

Flory argues religious publications generally lost prestige because “key persons within journalism (especially publishers and editors, and also journalism professionalizers from the ranks of the universities and the active press) actively sought to undermine traditional religion.” Religion was portrayed as “lacking in modern understanding,” and science had become “the authoritative voice for modern life.” Journalism’s emphasis on scientific method effectively shut out most advocacy from its ranks. By emphasizing science, those who pushed professionalization “ultimately privileged scientific authority over religious authority...[and] presented journalism as the

¹³⁷ Norman Jameson, phone interview, August 22, 2018.

¹³⁸ Charles Austin, “The History and Role of the Protestant Press” in *Reporting Religion: Facts & Faith*, ed. Benjamin J. Hubbard (Sonoma, Calif.: Polebridge Press, 1990), 109.

profession best suited to succeed religion in the modern world.”¹³⁹ Flory contends that religion’s own fragmentation contributed to the demise of the effectiveness of its journalism. “[M]ost of these publications were specialized by type and/or by theology or denomination, which made it easier for groups without these cleavages to organize and gain a larger market share for their journalism product.”¹⁴⁰ This is an important concept because Flory assumes market share as the most appropriate driving force. Southern Baptist Press Association members did not. Instead, they considered ministry and purpose as priorities.

Austin contends the religious press held its importance to ethnic communities (Blacks and language groups) for a longer period of time than it did with whites because it “was the source of ethnic identity and unity, inspiration, and polemics, as well as general news.” Overall, the religious press “became more genteel,” Austin believes, as America became more pluralistic. The religious press chose to “self-consciously and piously” separate itself “from the lurid, worldly, impious headlines of the secular press.” Yet, “movement-centered periodicals coaxed, rallied, and harangued readers from the pulpits of crusading editors.”¹⁴¹ Southern Baptist state papers rarely crusaded, although Knight, as editor of *Home Mission Magazine*, did so during the Civil Rights Movement.

Religion, then, in commercial journalism’s point of view was reduced to a generality. Flory argues that both religious and journalism leaders promoted the concept of “general religion.”¹⁴² From the commercial news organizations’ perspective, religion

¹³⁹ Flory, 397.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, 429.

¹⁴¹ Austin, 110.

was to be treated from a news point of view, with no religion to be treated differently than others. Even decidedly religious publications could be more generalized. Flory points to the *Christian Science Monitor* as taking “a notably neutral approach to religion reporting.” He cites Willis Abbott, the *Monitor’s* editor in 1926, who declared he would only include one “metaphysical article” in each issue and exclude from the paper “matters repugnant to the religious convictions” of its readers.¹⁴³ “Religion then, even for a newspaper with specifically religious ownership, was treated as a general moral good, but without promoting any sectarian principles.” Flory argues that journalism became a functional equivalent of religion because it developed a creed, martyrs, heroes, and “the language of truth-seeking and self-sacrifice to the ideals of journalism.”¹⁴⁴

SBPA Revitalization

Although Southern Baptist editors saw and practiced journalism from a lived religion perspective, they developed a desire to become as professional as their commercial counterparts. Commercialization of journalism began in the 1830s, considered a “revolution” triggered by advances in printing technology.

Commercialization helped newspaper editors break with tradition and become more of an agency in society.¹⁴⁵ Professionalization of journalism developed first in the late 1800s

¹⁴² Flory, 423. However, Flory draws only from one religionist, Rev. Lloyd C. Douglas, pastor of the Congregational Church in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in the early 1900s and a former journalist. According to Flory, Douglas promoted the idea of journalism as the new “force” in society. Journalists, then, should support religious leaders because many people still paid attention to ministers’ words. “Thus, journalism had been elevated to the position of being able to positively influence the religious leaders of the community, rather than religion have an influence on journalism,” Flory wrote.

¹⁴³ Ibid, 424. Flory cites Willis J. Abbott, “A Force for Clean Journalism,” *Quill* (January 1926), 6.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid. However, it also could be argued that, at least early in the process, mainstream journalism sought validation by using the religious language of the acceptable practice of the day, especially since Flory notes that Walter Williams’ 1915 Journalists’ Creed “seems clearly to have been modeled after the historic confessions of the church....”

and early 1900s out of news workers' desire for greater independence from news organization owners and more prestige for their work. The industry as a whole adopted a "professionalization project" in the 1920s in the face of less confidence in the ability of democratic governments to gather information and keep citizens informed. It "promised that journalists ... would be independent and autonomous professionals" who would be able "to overcome the biases inherent in both ... untrained ... ordinary humans and the interested industrial machinery of the press as big business." The industry measured progress by numbers of journalism schools established and "the appearance of professional organizations," which could resemble either physician and law associations or industrial unions.¹⁴⁶

The secularization of journalism and the 1920s movement to further professionalize mainstream journalism played into the revitalization of the Southern Baptist Press Association in 1926. Junker believes the association formed for three reasons—society's "settling" following the Civil War, the number of Baptist publications had grown, and editors wanted and needed fellowship and assistance with the business and mechanics of newspaper work. Likely, financial concerns played a role, as well, because they competed with one another in states with more than one Baptist newspaper. Editors could have chosen to participate in the SBPA as a means of retaining their papers' regional identity. After considerable discussion at the SBC annual meeting in 1879, Southern Baptists severed ties with other Baptist bodies, specifically the Northern Baptist Convention (later renamed American Baptist Churches USA), even though

¹⁴⁵ Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), 13, 17.

¹⁴⁶ Nerone, 450.

Southern Baptist Convention leaders said they were willing to cooperate in mission efforts. The break indicated the SBC wanted to maintain its southern perspective. At least some SBPA members agreed; *The Christian Index* Editor Henry H. Tucker served on the committee that brought the resolution to the SBC annual meeting floor that year.¹⁴⁷

Although Baptist editors usually met annually from the organization's founding in 1895, they did not make the SBPA a priority until the mid-1920s. Editors questioned denominational loyalty occasionally, even as they pushed for support from the denomination's national and regional bodies and agencies. For example, in 1926 a paper titled "Better Support of Our Papers on the Part of Denominational Institutions and Enterprises" was presented. The following year, the editor of the *Mississippi Baptist Record* presented "a carefully prepared paper on 'To What Extent Should We Give Publication to Unfavorable or Unpalatable Facts?'"¹⁴⁸ SBPA occasionally challenged the attitudes of leaders in the broader society. In 1934, for example, "Is the Attitude of Business Men Toward the Denominational Paper Fair? If Not, Why? How Can It Be Changed?" was presented. The author "pointed out the danger of making the papers too largely promotional in character, thereby destroying reader interest" and called for "more practical articles."¹⁴⁹ Whether an attempt to reassert the standing of religious publications with the mainstream press or simply to convince Southern Baptist leaders and laypeople

¹⁴⁷ Junker, 13-14 and *Proceedings of the Twenty-fourth Session of the Southern Baptist Convention Held with the First Baptist Church, Atlanta, May 8-12, 1879* (Jas. P. Harrison & Co., State Printers & Publishers, 1879; accessed January 21, 2019 at http://media2.sbhla.org.s3.amazonaws.com/annuals/SBC_Annual_1879.pdf), 14, 20, 22, 24-26.

¹⁴⁸ Southern Baptist Press Association Records, SBPA Minutes, 1926-41 (Box 1, file 1.55).

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

of their need for uniquely Baptist news in an effort to strengthen and extend financial support, SBPA pushed for professionalization, including editorial independence.¹⁵⁰

A Host of Religious Press Associations

The Southern Baptist Press Association was among a host of press associations formed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The American Newspaper Publishers Association was founded in 1885, according to the National Newspaper Association. The ANPA has been characterized as formed primarily for newspaper publishers, with its focus on pending or passed national legislation.¹⁵¹ The Society of Professional Journalists formed in 1909 as Sigma Delta Chi. In 1910, students who had formed the Society of Professional Journalists had extended chapters beyond its initial Sigma Delta Chi fraternity founded at DePauw University in Greencastle, Indiana. It became a professional journalistic organization in 1916, with the first professional chapters established in 1921. Members are required to be professionals working for independent news organizations.¹⁵²

The American Society of News Editors began in 1922, primarily because of criticism two articles in the January *The Atlantic Monthly* leveled at the press, accusing journalists of seeking strong rights even in the face of poor reporting and “fanciful” editorializing. Casper S. Yost, a former editorial director at *The St. Louis Globe Democrat*, took the criticism to heart and proposed that editors work together to fight

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ American Society of News Editors website, asne.org/asne-history lists the date of the ANPA as 1887. The ANPA later became the National Newspaper Association (see www.nnaweb.org/history). The current website gives no additional historical information. See the ASNE website for the ANPA characterization.

¹⁵² Society for Professional Journalists website, spj.org/aboutspj.asp, accessed January 17, 2019.

criticism. After recruiting members during the American Newspaper Publishers Association meeting in April, the editors' association officially launched in October 1922, limiting its membership to editors of newspapers in cities of at least 100,000 in population. The ASNE held its first annual convention the following year. In 1978-79, the editor of *The Christian Science Monitor* served as the organization's president.¹⁵³

Many additional organizations were formed over the years for mainstream journalists, including Religion News Association. Founded in 1949 as Religious Newswriters Association, the organization was formed to support religion editors and reporters in mainstream newsrooms and to promote standards and ethics in religion reporting in commercial news outlets. The name was changed to Religion Newswriters Association in 1971 and to Religion News Association in 2016, to separate any assumption that the organization was tied to any specific faith tradition and to promote all religions as news.¹⁵⁴ The not-for-profit news agency Religion News Service, founded by the National Conference of Catholics and Jews in 1934 and acquired by Religion News Foundation in 2011, has operated to offer news about religion and spirituality.¹⁵⁵ Several Southern Baptist-affiliated state convention news organizations have utilized RNS stories from its beginning, particularly for news about other denominations and faith traditions.

¹⁵³ American Society of News Editors website, asne.org/asne-history, accessed January 17, 2019.

¹⁵⁴ Debra L. Mason, "RNA: Nearly Five Decades of Following Faith's Footsteps," Religion News Association website https://www.rna.org/page/rna_history, taken from "Body and Soul: RNA's 1997 Annual Meeting Program." Mason was the association's executive director at the time. Accessed January 18, 2019.

¹⁵⁵ Religion News Service website, <https://religionnews.com/about/>, accessed January 21, 2019. Also, John P. Ferré, "Protestant Press Relations, 1930-1970," in *Media and Religion in American History*, ed. Wm. David Sloan (Northport, AL: Vision Press, 2000), 271.

Other early religious publication associations include the Catholic Press Association in 1911. Catholics founded their first diocesan paper, the *Catholic Miscellany*, in Charleston, South Carolina in 1822, the same year the Baptists' *The Christian Index* began. Associated Church Press was founded in St. Louis in 1916. Bishop John England launched the *Catholic Miscellany* in an attempt to explain Catholic tenets to those outside the faith. Although several efforts were made in the late nineteenth century to organize, the Catholic Press Association finally was organized in Columbus, Ohio, in August 1911, in part to “combat the negative influence” of some commercial press and to begin a news service.¹⁵⁶

Associated Church Press began as the Editorial Council of the Religious Press when editors covering a St. Louis 1916 meeting of the Federal Council of Churches (now National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.) determined they would meet more often. The interdenominational group took its current name in 1937 and, in 1969, adopted a statement of ethics and professional practice, revising it several times since then. The organization offers training and awards for communications work to its member publications. Though it stresses professionalism, the ACP continues to function from a lived-religion perspective, noting that members are tied “by a common task of reflecting, describing, and supporting the life of faith and the Christian community.”¹⁵⁷ Several Southern Baptist news organizations participated in the past and continue to belong to

¹⁵⁶ Catholic Press Association of the United States & Canada website, accessed January 21, 2019.

¹⁵⁷ Associated Church Press website, <http://www.theacp.org/for-members/>, accessed January 21, 2019.

Associated Church Press. Former SBC public relations secretary and Baptist Press director W.C. Fields was the first Southern Baptist to serve as ACP president.¹⁵⁸

Ferré posits that additional religious press associations, particularly those devoted to public relations, developed after 1930 primarily as a means for organized religion to respond to the influence of commercial media. Laypeople listened to religious, especially Protestant, leaders in the nineteenth century. But circulation of specifically Protestant publications dropped by eighty percent between 1900 and 1930.¹⁵⁹ The Evangelical Press Association is among religious publication organizations formed in the mid-twentieth century. Founded in 1947, the EPA counts several Southern Baptist publications as members. Headed by an editor with the National Association of Evangelicals, thirty-five editors held the organizational meeting in Chicago in May 1948, with the first annual convention meeting in Chicago the following year. Among their objectives, the group determined “to establish a doctrinally united voice for conservative, evangelical periodical publishers who adhere to conservative evangelical beliefs,” including biblical inerrancy. They also agreed “to facilitate the acquisition and adoption of professional journalistic skills, techniques and standards.” At its beginning, the EPA also developed a statement of faith, which all members must accept to continue membership, formally adopted a code of ethics in 1954, and set up an annual contest in 1954. Developed under the auspices of the National Association of Evangelicals, EPA members decided to separate from that body, apparently sometime in the mid- to late-1950s, in an effort for

¹⁵⁸ Ibid. and Fields Papers: Southern Baptist Press Association 1968. Two American Baptists had served as ACP president prior to Fields’ stint in 1968.

¹⁵⁹ Ferré, 262-263. Ferré focuses on the development of religious public relations associations because he believes most Protestant denominations had recognized “their need for another media strategy,” namely public relations. According to him, several Protestant denominations had people in place to act as press liaisons by 1929, when Protestant leaders formed the Religious Publicity Council.

greater independence and for more freedom of the press and speech.¹⁶⁰ The American Jewish Press Association formed in 1944 for the English-language Jewish press in the United States and Canada.¹⁶¹

By the late 1920s, other press associations began to seek information from the SBPA about the Southern Baptist Convention's agencies.¹⁶² The influence of the 1920s mainstream journalism movement and the development of additional religious press organizations helped Southern Baptist Press Association members to focus on improving their individual publications and to promote professional journalistic standards. By the early 1920s, SBPA members pushed the Southern Baptist Convention to establish a national news service. An SBC committee reported in 1919 about the possibility but recommended further study. The SBC pushed the concept aside in 1922 because a campaign to raise \$75 million by November 1924 was implemented and the state papers were heavily involved in its promotion. Noting the difficulty in getting news from the national body and other states, editors again asked for a Baptist news service in their report to the convention in 1934. Although the report was accepted, no move was made to develop the service.¹⁶³ Perhaps establishment of a news service in the 1920s or 1930s would have hastened changes in the content of many state papers.

¹⁶⁰ Evangelical Press Association website, <https://www.evangelicalpress.com/about-epa/history-of-epa/>, accessed January 21, 2019.

¹⁶¹ American Jewish Press Association website, www.ajpa.org/page/AboutUs?, accessed April 14, 2019. The website gives no additional information about the association's history.

¹⁶² Southern Baptist Press Association Records, SBPA Minutes, 1926-41 (Box 1, file 1.55).

¹⁶³ Junker, 65, 77, 79.

More News, Fewer Sermons

Before 1945, most state Baptist newspapers carried “guest essays on a variety of subjects—some offering varying viewpoints on the same subject—letters to the editor, happenings in the state and beyond, sermonic and devotional materials, poems, brief quotations, editorial comments and gleanings, Sunday School lesson material, and denominational promotion.” News reporting was limited primarily to coverage of SBC and state convention meetings, according to Junker. However, he fails to take into account that most state papers were handled by one editor, which often was the state convention executive or a staff person, and maybe a secretary. The editors developed a concern for state and national convention news about issues, according to minutes of the association’s 1935 annual meeting. Members discussed what they believed a “well-balanced and adequate denominational paper” should contain, determining that it should be a balance of doctrine and practical application, “and that the demand is that the denominational paper major rather on news items, digests of current events, etc.”¹⁶⁴

Junker also contends state paper editors rarely criticized the state and national bodies before 1945. He insists that before state bodies took over, most state Baptist papers refrained from negative comments because they “already had placed high priority on supporting” the denomination. “But after ownership change, editorial criticism was almost nonexistent.”¹⁶⁵ By using 1945 as the demarcation, Junker implies that professionalization of the state Baptist papers, at least in terms of news gathering, objectivity, and editorial freedom, was not a concern until the founding of the

¹⁶⁴ Southern Baptist Press Association Records, SBPA Minutes, 1926-1941 (Box 1, file 1.55).

¹⁶⁵ Junker, 64.

denomination's news service, Baptist Press. On the contrary, editors already were struggling with their role.

While the editors may not have offered much public criticism about the SBC, the tension between the editors' desire to promote the denomination and its programs and the desire to become more professional in their craft and to be considered as professional as their mainstream counterparts began to build. They were confronted with choices as early as their 1927 annual gathering. The theme that year focused on advantages and disadvantages of state convention ownership of the individual papers. *The Baptist Record* Editor P.I. Lipsey presented "a carefully prepared paper on 'To What Extent Should We Give Publication to Unfavorable or Unpalatable Facts?'"¹⁶⁶ At their 1934 annual meeting, editors worried about becoming too promotional. The following year they recognized the need to balance denominational and "doctrinal matter" and to major on news and current events. They struggled with the line between the definition of house organ and news organization. Three assigned topics at the editors' 1939 annual meeting indicate they wanted to be more than denominational spokesmen. They discussed cooperative ethics, openmindedness, and denominational propaganda.¹⁶⁷

At the same time, however, the editors' concern for financial viability led them to push for closer ties with denominational entities. At the 1940 SBC annual meeting, the Baptist Papers committee, composed primarily of editors, emphasized Southern Baptists' need for the state newsjournals, declaring they "should be in every Baptist home in all the South." The committee appealed to regionalism and to ministry, quoting from then-SBC

¹⁶⁶ Southern Baptist Press Association Records, SBPA Minutes, 1926-1941 (Box 1, file 1.55).

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

president L.R. Scarborough, who had spoken at the Southern Baptist Press Association's annual meeting earlier in the year: "These papers are a fundamental necessity to the promotion, expansion, and growth of our churches, and the causes of Christ. To be without them or to fail to adequately support them is denominational suicide. The denomination has yet to come to the highest and best evaluation and utilization of these mighty assets for the on-going of Christ's Kingdom." The committee offered seven suggestions as part of its 1940 report. The sixth suggestion appealed to patriotism to stress the need for increased circulation. "Just as the national defense program is being speeded up, without the loss of any time, so in strengthening our spiritual defenses, we should, without delay, place these messages of divine sovereignty, of personal stewardship, and of missionary responsibility in every home."¹⁶⁸

Even as SBPA members as a group sought to be seen as journalism professionals, wanted more independence, and looked for ways to fund their work, they still considered their positions as ministry. Mississippi *Baptist Record* Editor P.I. Lipsey spoke on editorial quality at the SBPA 1941 annual meeting, declaring that he did not change his ministry when he became an editor. "The first business of the paper, he said, is to make better Christians; [next], to make the best possible Baptists; and then to make [world] Christians out of them," the minutes record.¹⁶⁹ The minutes also indicate that from 1940 to 1954, SBPA members were somewhat at odds over how much space should be given to doctrine and how much to news. At the 1941 annual meeting, two speakers argued that

¹⁶⁸ Southern Baptist Convention, *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention, Nineteen Hundred and Forty, Eighty-fifth Session, Ninety-fifth Year*. Baltimore, Maryland, June 12-16, 1940 (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Baptist Convention, 1940) 50-53; accessed January 24, 2019 at http://media2.sbhla.org.s3.amazonaws.com/annuals/SBC_Annual_1940.pdf.

¹⁶⁹ Southern Baptist Press Association Records, SBPA Minutes, 1926-1941 (Box 1, file 1.55).

the state papers had neglected doctrine and needed to emphasize it. They declared the written word as a powerful way to share doctrine. “The Apostle Paul did a great deal more by his letters than by his preaching,” they said.¹⁷⁰ They also emphasized the Baptist papers needed to include Christian doctrine because “[o]ther forces—Nazism, Communism, Totalitarianism of all types—make large use of literature and propaganda.”¹⁷¹ That sentiment was reinforced at SBPA meetings with United States’ participation in World War II. The editors emphasized the press’ role, including their own, in recovery. “In a world seemingly upside down and wrongside out, the influence of the press in the rebuilding of our civilization cannot be overestimated. Certainly, the press should take the lead in directing the thinking of our people as they seek to direct the march of mankind when peace has been restored,” then-SBC President Pat M. Neff, said in a note read to SBPA members at their 1943 annual gathering.¹⁷²

The move for the Baptist papers to become more news oriented gained momentum as denominational leaders began to respond to editors’ requests for more news. At a June 1945 meeting in conjunction with the Southern Baptist Convention annual session, press association members again considered asking the SBC Public Relations Committee to establish “an agency to select facts regarding public affairs of particular interest to Baptists and furnish them to the editors.” They appointed a

¹⁷⁰ Paul is considered an apostle of Jesus Christ, even though he did not become a follower until after Jesus’ death and resurrection. According to the New Testament book of Acts, Paul had a vision of Jesus as he traveled to Damascus. Paul, a persecutor of Christians, became a staunch supporter and leader of Christianity. He is credited with writing at least thirteen New Testament books, written as epistles or letters to the Christian churches of his day.

¹⁷¹ Southern Baptist Press Association Records, SBPA Minutes, 1926-1941 (Box 1, file 1.55).

¹⁷² Southern Baptist Press Association Records, SBPA Minutes, 1943 (Box 1, file 1.56).

committee to study the possibility.¹⁷³ Although the 1946 minutes do not indicate the outcome of the committee's work, Porter Routh, a graduate of the University of Missouri's School of Journalism and editor of *The Baptist Messenger* in Oklahoma in the early-1940s, was instrumental in providing the news the editors wanted after he accepted a position with the Baptist Sunday School Board's Department of Survey and Statistics in 1945.¹⁷⁴ As the denomination provided more news, many state papers began to add professional journalistic expertise to its staff, particularly among associate editors, either with training or practical journalism or publication experience.¹⁷⁵

Even though Junker contends that most state Baptist newsjournals remained strong denominational supporters from 1946 to 1961, the shift to emphasis on news and editorial independence got an additional boost with the official formation of the Baptist Public Relations Association in 1954. An exploratory committee met in December 1953, with the organizational meeting held in conjunction with the Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting in St. Louis in June 1954. Most meetings of the Southern Baptist Press Association had included discussions of advertising and ways in which to get SBC agencies to advertise and promote the state papers. The new BPRA encouraged each state convention to hire a public relations director and provided workshops at every annual meeting, beginning in 1955.¹⁷⁶ BPRA also became the promotional arm for the denomination and its agencies. Several state paper editors and associate editors also were

¹⁷³ Southern Baptist Press Association Records, SBPA Minutes, 1945 (Box 1, file 1.56).

¹⁷⁴ Junker, 86, 97.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, 98.

¹⁷⁶ James H. Cox, *We've a Story to Tell: A History of Baptist Public Relations Association, 1953-1987* (Nashville, Tennessee: Baptist Public Relations Association, 1986), 17-18.

BPRA members. In addition, the 1950s saw the development of communications educational programs at Southern Baptist-affiliated seminaries and an increased emphasis on broadcast ministries.

In some respects, professionalism might have developed more rapidly among the denomination's press if the Southern Baptist Convention had allowed more freedom for its affiliated agencies. Although the convention touted its cooperative structure, its move to centralize its bureaucracy created tension between cooperative freedom and bureaucratic demands.

CHAPTER 2

Unity and Truth

The Southern Baptist Convention was founded on the basis of cooperation and a congregational form of governance, characterized as Baptist democracy. The call to cooperation played a role at pivotal points in the history of Southern Baptist journalism. In fact, convention leaders strongly encouraged members of the Southern Baptist Press Association to cooperate from the organization's beginning.¹⁷⁷ Often, leaders appealed to cooperation and autonomy at times when they requested state Baptist papers and the convention's news service to downplay coverage of, or simply to ignore, issues or events that might cause embarrassment. The cooperative ideal sometimes was (and still is) at odds with the Southern Baptist promise that each element in the governance structure would remain autonomous.

The larger Board of the General Missionary Convention (commonly referred to as the Triennial Convention) of U.S. Baptists split over slavery, with those in the South choosing to establish a separate organization in 1845 (See Appendix 1). At that time, Blacks accounted for about a third of the membership in churches that affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention. However, by 1900, SBC-affiliated churches were virtually one hundred percent white. Major SBC churches with a large African-American membership included First Baptist churches in Richmond, Virginia; Montgomery,

¹⁷⁷ Southern Baptist Convention, *Proceedings (Forty-first Session, Fifty-first Year) of the Southern Baptist Convention held at Chattanooga, Tenn., May 8-12, 1896*. (Atlanta, Ga.: SBC Secretaries, Southern Baptist Convention, 1896), 18. The Methods of Work and Missions Journal committee included several suggestions in its report to the SBC annual meeting in 1896, including: "We suggest that the Baptist press of the South be requested to use all diligence to promote the co-operation of the brotherhood in work, especially by emphasizing the dignity, practicability, and great responsibility of New Testament liberty."

Alabama; and Natchez, Mississippi. The development of Black Baptist state and national conventions, particularly the National Baptist Convention in 1895, attracted Black members and churches away from the Southern Baptist Convention. Baptist historians estimate the SBC lost nearly half its membership between 1880 and 1883 and became essentially an all-white convention by 1900 because of that shift.¹⁷⁸

As the Southern Baptist Convention developed, leaders moved toward a more centralized structure, rather than continuing to follow the societal approach the broader body of Baptists had used and that the northern churches maintained after Baptists in the South split away. Each Baptist church, each association of churches (regional bodies), and each state convention operate independently, without direct control. Both the SBC and American Baptist Churches USA rely on cooperative effort.¹⁷⁹ The Southern Baptist Convention developed its agencies, including mission boards and its publication arm, as part of the national body. Churches that choose to cooperatively affiliate with regional, state, and national Southern Baptist bodies must meet specific requirements, which generally include contributing financially and agreeing to follow decisions members at each autonomous level adopt collectively. Congregations and associations can choose to

¹⁷⁸ David Roach, "Black Southern Baptist history said to be 'at a crossroads,'" Baptist Press, February 5, 2018, <http://www.bpnews.net/50310/black-so-bapt-history-said-to-be-at-a-crossroads>. The SBC remained a white convention until 1951 when two Black churches affiliated with two Baptist associations, one in California and one in Alaska. Both congregations were accepted, even though they faced strong opposition in both cases. The dissertation introduction discusses how slavery issues led to the split among Baptists in 1845. Paul Harvey believes independent Black churches, including among Baptists, developed because whites refused to allow Black members equality within the congregation. (Paul Harvey, *Freedom's Coming: Religious Culture and the Shaping of the South from the Civil War Through the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 16.)

¹⁷⁹ American Baptist mission boards and other agencies still follow the societal model, and each operates independently. In the societal model, each entity is responsible to raise its own funding. The SBC developed the Cooperative Program to unify its funding procedure. Governance in the societal model also is less centralized.

remove themselves from membership in state and national bodies, and vice versa.¹⁸⁰

While the nature of the convention's structure seems unimportant, it plays heavily into decisions to challenge the system. Congregants through the study period for the most part followed their pastor's lead and believed that their state organizations and the national body would make decisions in line with their understanding of Protestant scripture.

Since its inception, the Southern Baptist Convention has emphasized community and cooperation among its members. Its governance structure stresses a cooperative attitude and unity in effort, particularly for stateside and overseas mission endeavors. Unity, dressed in evangelical interpretation of Protestant scripture and theology, undergirds the Baptist governance structure. Whenever unity is threatened, either compromises are made, or the resultant disunity is seen as God's will in order to explain any conflict that arises. Although unity was a central concept from the beginning of the SBC, the denomination faced issues that hammered at that unified front throughout its history.

Leonard points out that controversy, which often led to schism, has been part of American religious history from colonial times. In the eighteenth century, splits occurred over salvation, ordination, missions, and revivalism. Racial, ethnic, language, and political issues split nearly all major Protestant groups—Presbyterians, Methodists, Lutherans, Congregationalists, Mennonites, Adventists, and Baptists—in the mid-nineteenth century. Resistance to modernism, including controversies over science,

¹⁸⁰ H. Leon McBeth, *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage* (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman Press, 1990); Bill J. Leonard, *Baptist Ways: A history* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson Press, 2003).

evolution and methods of biblical criticism, created additional factions among Protestant groups. Several splits occurred among conservatives over orthodoxy.¹⁸¹

Preserve unity

At both historical junctures studied in this dissertation—the Civil Rights Movement and the further conservative shift of the Southern Baptist Convention—Southern Baptist journalists were encouraged to limit reporting so that unity could be preserved. Editors often saw the state papers’ role as a unifying factor. They believed the state papers were the most effective communication tool the SBC had to share information about the convention’s efforts in evangelism and missions.

Southern Baptist polity rests on freedom from outside authority. All members have an equal voice in congregational governance. In that respect, it operates democratically. Pinson believes the primary difference between democracy in its political sense and in the congregational sense is the ultimate focus. In the political sense, the “people rule.” In the congregational sense, Jesus Christ is the “ultimate” authority. Much of this philosophy rests on interpretation of Christian Scripture. First Peter 2:9 and Revelation 5:1-10 are used to explain that individuals who follow the Christian faith tradition have direct access to God and, as “believer priests,” can determine God’s will for themselves. These verses, coupled with Hebrews chapters seven through ten that declare believers are part of a royal priesthood, form the Southern Baptist concept of the priesthood of the believer. That royal priesthood “is a fellowship in which each believer

¹⁸¹ Bill J. Leonard, *God’s Last and Only Hope: The Fragmentation of the Southern Baptist Convention* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), viii-ix.

priest is to seek God’s direction as a cooperative part of that fellowship.”¹⁸² The collective fellowship is expressed in the local congregation.

Even though each local Baptist congregation operates autonomously, early in the broader Baptist denominational history churches began working together for common causes, Baptist historian Walter Shurden notes. “Although Baptists treasured the independence of the local churches, they quickly sensed the need for the interdependence of the churches.” Congregations formed associations, usually within a geographical region, which Shurden believes “initiated the process of organized denominational life among Baptists.” Later, associations combined to form state and national conventions.¹⁸³ Baptist newspapers helped facilitate communication efforts among churches and associations. They provided biblical material, especially for isolated, rural congregations, and became the “single source of information and the single symbol of unity” for the churches.¹⁸⁴ The editors felt the need for cooperation among the state papers for improved communication among themselves, for facilitating news sharing, and for building advertising revenue from convention agencies.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸² William M. Pinson, Jr., “Congregational Church Governance.” Part of the Baptist Distinctives series on the Baptist Distinctives website: www.baptistdistinctives.org/resources/articles/congregational-church-governance/, 2010. A former professor at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Pinson served as president of Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary, and then as executive director of the Baptist General Convention of Texas from 1983-2000. He is volunteer director of the Texas Baptist Heritage Center.

¹⁸³ Walter B. Shurden, “Baptist Associations and the Turn toward Denominational Cooperation: 1640s/1707 in *Turning Points in Baptist History: A Festschrift in Honor of Harry Leon McBeth*, ed. Michael E. Williams, Sr. and Walter B. Shurden (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2008) 63-64.

¹⁸⁴ Albert McClellan, “The Development of Southern Baptist Journalism.” Presentation, annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Press Association, February 15, 1971. Albert McClellan Collection (Box 32, file 32.12), Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Nashville, Tenn.

¹⁸⁵ Junker, 14.

Baptist democracy also is strongly tied to nationalism because Baptists pushed for the Bill of Rights and the spread of the U.S. form of democracy to the world, according to Canipe. Baptists were once “outsiders” in America until the early 1800s when “these one-time dissenters had successfully made the transition from persecuted religious outsiders to patriotic, cultural insiders.” Consequently, they influenced political values.¹⁸⁶ Canipe points to the influence in the first quarter of the 1900s of church historian and Christian social reform activist Walter Rauschenbusch (1861-1918), former Southern Baptist Theological Seminary President E.Y. Mullins (1860-1928), and First Baptist Church of Dallas Pastor George W. Truett (1867-1944) for the nationalist connection. They also promoted Baptist democracy in the denomination and local churches. The three men brought Baptist ideals and the democratic concept “into a coherent, popularly accessible vision and, in the process, made a last decisive break with the dissenting heritage of Baptists in America. They made it plain: what America is to politics, Baptists are to religion — God’s chosen way for humanity.”¹⁸⁷ Although Canipe lays the development of Baptist democracy at the feet of the moderate faction within the SBC during the 1960s and 1970s, the fundamental-conservative group used Baptist history to support its active participation in the political Religious Right movement.

The SBC took on more characteristics of American democracy during the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s as fundamental-conservatives maneuvered to take bureaucratic control of the convention and the moderate-conservatives struggled to

¹⁸⁶ Lee Canipe, *A Baptist Democracy: Separating God from Caesar in the Land of the Free* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2011), 8-9.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 12-13.

maintain their hold on it. Farnsley called the Southern Baptist Convention a “kind of populist collective” that “developed...a formal two-party system” to “deal with the stress caused by increasing diversity and pluralism.”¹⁸⁸ The two-party approach remained in effect until the fundamental-conservative faction was able to get their candidates elected. Once they controlled the convention and its agencies, the need for a two-party system ended with the defection or elimination of most moderate-conservatives from their positions. Fundamental-conservatives limited their pool of leaders to those who agreed to their theological perspective. “All this occurred, moreover, in a climate of decreasing denominational rigidity in the nation as a whole,” Farnsley contends.¹⁸⁹ Southern Baptists became more rigid as other denominations made room for pluralism. He believes conflict rose as the SBC tried to centralize its work but still maintain its concept of independence.¹⁹⁰ The convention has struggled throughout its history between congregational, independent polity and “its need for efficient, bureaucratic control.” Its congregational polity rests on “the idea of joining together to reach consensus.” Historically, messengers (delegates) to the annual meeting weren’t expected (and didn’t expect) “to thrash out complex theological issues in an open forum. On the contrary, they expected to come together in a common understanding of God’s will for their lives....” The SBC democracy was based upon spiritual ends—expanding God’s kingdom—not on

¹⁸⁸ Arthur Emery Farnsley, II, *Southern Baptist Politics: Authority and Power in the Restructuring of an American Denomination* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), xiii.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 4.

protecting and/or promoting individual rights.¹⁹¹ They claimed to live their religion even in business sessions.

Canipe applies “Baptist democracy” as a derogatory term. But in the 1970s and 1980s Southern Baptist leaders believed their form of democracy was a unifying factor for the denomination, and state Baptist editors saw their papers as the means to sustain it. “Facts at times can be extremely unpleasant—but this does not mean that they should be suppressed. A democracy cannot function properly without an informed public opinion. Baptist Press and the state Baptist papers perform a vital role in making our Southern Baptist Convention democracy work,” Jack Gritz of the Oklahoma *Baptist Messenger* insisted in 1971.¹⁹² “News is the ingredient essential to the people who in our Baptist democracy decide whether they will cooperate in our efforts to bring all people into a right relationship with God through Jesus Christ,” Texas *Baptist Standard* Editor John Hurt declared in an editorial after the newsjournal opened its new building in 1975.¹⁹³ In his president’s address at the 1979 Southern Baptist Press Association annual meeting, John E. Roberts, editor of the South Carolina *Baptist Courier*, insisted, “We have been entrusted with the most sacred and most powerful instrument of democracy. In our Baptist democracy that instrument is the denominational paper.”¹⁹⁴ Then-SBPA President Bobby Terry tied Baptist democracy to soul competency, the belief that each believer can

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 35, 40-41, 43.

¹⁹² Reprint of Gritz editorial in the North Carolina *Biblical Recorder*, January 23, 1971, 3, Fields Papers (Box 96, file 96.57).

¹⁹³ John Hurt, “Standard — ‘Publish and Conceal Not,’” *Baptist Standard*, June 4, 1975, 6.

¹⁹⁴ John E. Roberts, “President’s Address,” in Southern Baptist Press Association, 1978-1979 Annual, March 1, 1978-February 28, 1979. Presented at the annual meeting, Anchorage, Alaska, February 14, 1979. Fields Papers (Box 97, file 97.10).

approach God alone. With God as the final authority, Southern Baptists were a “denomination of common people.”¹⁹⁵ As late as 1989, supporters of Baptist Press and its editors pushed the SBC Executive Committee to keep BP as “an objective and viable news service which is a necessity in the working of a democratic body....”¹⁹⁶ Southern Baptist leaders used the Baptist democracy ideal, wrapped in the call for evangelism, as a means to hold onto denominational unity.

Unity as Ideal

Southern Baptists’ tight hold to unity as an ideal has its roots in southern regionalism, but an underlying current of tension also existed as fundamentalists challenged Baptist acceptance of modernism. Fundamentalism in Christianity began in the nineteenth century to oppose modernism and liberalism and to maintain classical theology. Fundamentalists saw modernism as a challenge to their understanding of scriptural truth and orthodoxy. They held to biblical inerrancy, the virgin birth of Jesus, Jesus’ death as substitutionary atonement for believers, Jesus’ resurrection, pre-millennialism, Jesus’ Second Coming, Adam and Eve as the first human beings, and Satan as a literal being. Fundamentalists insisted that all true Christians should accept their orthodoxy. Leonard believes fundamentalism is “the more doctrinally militant wing” of the broader evangelical form of Christianity.¹⁹⁷ He defines Southern Baptist fundamental-conservatives as people who define biblical authority in terms of inerrancy

¹⁹⁵ Bobby S. Terry, “The Purpose of Our Papers: A Perspective,” presented at the SBPA annual meeting, Williamsburg, Va., February 13, 1986. SBPA-Papers Presented, 1986, Southern Baptist Press Association Records (Box 1, file 1.11).

¹⁹⁶ “Additional Thoughts of the Liaison Committee Members,” SBPA – Annual Meeting, 1989, Southern Baptist Press Association Records (Box 1, file 1.14).

¹⁹⁷ Leonard (1990), 5-7.

(the Christian scripture as being truth “without any mixture of error”¹⁹⁸) and who formed an alliance to normalize that doctrine as basic. Some moderate-conservatives are inerrantists, while others are not. Most moderates hold to “what they view as traditional Baptist doctrine,” which Leonard lists as “biblical authority, missions, evangelism, soul competency, and religious freedom.”¹⁹⁹ The Southern Baptist congregational governance structure with its democratic underpinning allowed the fundamental-conservative group to develop a strong base throughout the late 1970s and 1980s. Ammerman sees the conflict that developed as a “tug-of-war” between leaders and “the messengers who thought *they* should have the last word.”²⁰⁰ It is precisely because of the congregational form of governance that fundamental-conservatives were able to build a broad base by 1979. Power rests with the side that can convince members who attend convention business sessions that the positions that side holds are “godly,” that God has ordained their position. Southern Baptist leaders and administrators needed the denominational press to get their positions to church members. Baptist Press news service grew in importance because the state papers relied on it for most of their news about the national body.

Church historian Martin E. Marty considered the Southern Baptist Convention as among the most cohesive religious organizations in the late 1970s because it had developed denominational norms, which built unity but still allowed for diversity in theology and practice. The strong tie to unity began before the outbreak of the Civil War.

¹⁹⁸ Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee, *The Baptist Faith and Message*, 2000. sbc.net/bfm2000/bfm2000.asp

¹⁹⁹ Leonard (1990), 7.

²⁰⁰ Ammerman, 68.

Baptists in the South saw the refusal of the General Convention’s mission society to appoint slaveholders as a political issue—that the national body had made its mission emphasis, which had begun in 1814, a political issue. Baptists in the South unified around sectional issues, especially slavery, which became “the basis for their break with the North and their decision to form a new denomination. The SBC was therefore southern before it was missionary.” With the South’s defeat, Southern Baptist leaders accepted the concept of the southern Lost Cause and spiritualized the defeat as God’s will.²⁰¹ From that point, whenever an issue developed without a clear option, leaders spiritualized it. “That tendency remain[ed] a significant element of SBC life” at least through 1990, Leonard believes. Southern Baptist fundamentalists also held onto the biblical literalism and interpretation they had developed. “The South had created a hermeneutic that used biblical interpretation as a source of social and religious solidarity,” Leonard contends.²⁰² With each cultural change, the more conservative faction within the SBC shifted in such a way so as to leave its biblical interpretation intact. During the Civil Rights era, fundamental-conservatives did not have enough political clout within the convention to stop moderate-conservative Southern Baptist acceptance of legal and political changes. Doctrines were defined broadly to allow for the theological diversity that had developed

²⁰¹ At the end of the Civil War, Southerners could not cope with the loss. To explain it, they developed the myth that the South was a superior society to that of the North. The war was the result of a clash between the two societies in which the South fought for its civilization against the odds. The war was an “heroic epic,” rather than a fight for equal rights. The concept developed following Reconstruction to explain the defeat and to defend the Southern way of life and to maintain white political power. It also was used to validate whites’ interpretation of the Bible, particularly of the Old Testament. (See Matthew Wills, “Origins of the Confederate Lost Cause,” July 15, 2015 (JSTOR Daily, daily.jstor.org/origins-confederate-lost-cause/) and Mitch Landrieu, “How I Learned About the ‘Cult of the Lost Cause,’” March 12, 2018 (Smithsonian Magazine, www.smithsonianmag.com/history/how-i-learned-about-cult-lost-cause-180968426/).

²⁰² Leonard (1990), 18-19.

within the convention. Until 1979, leaders generally tried not to alienate the subgroups so that unity would be maintained. Ideals at odds were “held in uneasy tension” and SBC leaders worked for balance and compromise.²⁰³ Southern Baptist leaders were able to maintain unity through the Civil Rights era by appealing to the law. But throughout the 1980s, fundamental-conservatives built a coalition that allowed a return to a stronger emphasis on biblical literalism. They were willing to sacrifice the unity that made room for differences and substituted a unity built on conformity.

Newspapers Promote Unity

The Baptist newspapers that chose to affiliate with Southern Baptists in the late 1800s and early 1900s developed denominational ties and used their pages and their influence to maintain unity. Throughout his account, Junker emphasizes the role the state Baptist newspapers made at critical junctures in Southern Baptist Convention history. He also points out that loyalty to the denomination grew, at least during the formative years. Many state papers that began as independent concerns found themselves financially strapped following the Civil War and Reconstruction; others faced the problem in the 1920s. In some cases, state Baptist conventions agreed to purchase them outright or simply to take control. All Baptist papers were still independent concerns in 1900, but the trend to state convention ownership moved forward in the early part of the decade for two reasons—editors’ “principle” and the denominational need for “standard-bearers.” Even though operating independently, most state Baptist newspapers were pro-denomination by 1900. “These were the kind of editors which state convention and Southern Baptist leadership wanted. Conventions were beginning to consolidate, and they saw a viable,

²⁰³ Ibid, 98-99.

supportive state paper as being critical to this effort.” Baptist state organizations were willing to take on a paper if the editor was committed to Southern Baptist causes. Some state conventions started new papers or handpicked from among two or more competing Baptist newspapers within their state.²⁰⁴ Many editors willingly sacrificed their autonomy for state and national Baptist unity. “We keep before us a prime object to be desired and maintained, the unity of Virginia Baptists.... We sacrifice much of what newspapermen regard as eminently desirable for the sake of denominational peace and fraternity,” wrote A.E. Dickinson, editor of the Virginia Baptist *Religious Herald*.²⁰⁵

The desire for denominational peace served as the primary guide for Southern Baptists until the end of the 1970s and early 1980s. James Griffith, executive director-treasurer of the Georgia Baptist Convention, insisted that state papers could be both journalistically professional and denominationally unifying. “The *Index* [the Georgia Baptist state paper] is not a general newspaper, and while utilizing the best in methods and equipment of the world of journalism to be afforded, the paper is to reflect the spirit and theological position of Georgia and Southern Baptists,” Griffith told SBPA members in 1980. He added that the newspaper’s purpose was to provide information and “to cultivate unity of spirit and cooperation among Baptists” so that they could achieve the convention’s goals.²⁰⁶ *The Christian Index* Editor Jack Harwell stressed unity as a Baptist family, at the time. The state paper could either build up or destroy the churches and the denomination. It could “be a marvelous cohesive force or a tragically divisive one.” The

²⁰⁴ Junker, 38.

²⁰⁵ Ibid, 39. Quoting the *Religious Herald*, November 14, 1895, 2.

²⁰⁶ James N. Griffith, “The Role of the State Baptist Paper in the Eyes of the Executive Director,” presented at the Southern Baptist Press Association annual meeting, February 1980. SBPA Minutes and Records.

editor, Harwell insisted, could function “outside the family circle” or as “a concerned and considerate partner in the spiritual family, seeking to mutually share what is best for every Kingdom cause.”²⁰⁷ Fundamental-conservatives later ousted Harwell from his position.

By the mid-1950s, leaders used all their forms of communication, including the state papers, Baptist Press, and agency publications, to build community and strengthen unity. Journalism has been among the forms of communication societies have used to consciously and formally create community in an organized way. Journalism also has been used to undermine communities. Formal institutions, such as the church, and the media construct all types of public communities, including religious elites.²⁰⁸ Through the convention’s history, SBC leaders never considered themselves as religious elites, but said they wanted and worked for unity among members so that the gospel message would be advanced. Each time division seemed possible, leaders appealed to that message. Religious journalism is a form of civic journalism because “[c]ivic journalism longs for the city on a hill, the single community, the unified people...,” Nord believes.²⁰⁹

Three “newer” leadership styles developed throughout the 1950s that attempted to keep the Southern Baptist Convention together, despite differences and the shift from a strictly Southern point of view. “Organization men” pushed the convention’s programs and formed compromises when needed. Their goal was to “keep the body together,

²⁰⁷ Ibid., quoting Jack Harwell, *An Old Friend with New Credentials* (Atlanta: *The Christian Index*, Executive Committee of the Baptist Convention of the State of Georgia, 1972), 183-184.

²⁰⁸ David Paul Nord, *Communities of Journalism: A History of American Newspapers and Their Readers* (Urbana: university of Illinois Press, 2001), 2.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 12-13.

solvent, and moving.” Another group of leaders stressed the “spiritual” over the “institutional.” They concentrated on healing and reconciliation for “spiritual unity.” “Charismatic” leaders were those whose purpose was to “shift the convention’s focus away from potentially divisive issues.”²¹⁰ During the Civil Rights Movement, the organization formed compromises by pushing adherence to state and federal law. The push for spiritual unity dominated the fundamental-conservative/moderate-conservative conflict.

News Values and Professional Ideology

Stonbely argues that ethnographic studies, particularly those conducted in the 1960s through the 1980s, added the concept of news values and ideology to the understanding of media professionalism. Gans especially pushed the idea that news professionals adhere to common values and ideology. Stonbely also notes that newspeople include autonomy/independence and objectivity as two critical components of the industry’s understanding of its professionalism.²¹¹ Although objectivity has held sway historically among journalists and news organizations,²¹² how that concept is defined and interpreted often determines its place within a specific news organization or journalism niche.

²¹⁰ Samuel S. Hill, Jr., epilogue to *Churches in Cultural Captivity: A History of the Social Attitudes of Southern Baptists*, by John Lee Eighmy (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1972), 205-206.

²¹¹ Sarah Stonbely, “The social and intellectual contexts of the U.S. ‘newsroom studies,’ and the media sociology of today,” *Journalism Studies* 16, no. 2 (2015), 259-274, doi: 10.1080/1461670X.2013.859865.

²¹² Objectivity as a journalistic norm and a measure of journalism ethics has been under considerable fire in the mid-2000s. (See Stephanie Craft, “Distinguishing Features: Reconsidering the link between journalism’s professional status and ethics,” *Journalism & Communication Monographs* 19, no. 4 (Winter 2017), 260-301). But it has played that role historically.

Objectivity became a journalistic value in the early 1800s, as newspapers became independent of political parties. The emphasis changed as a result of the “democratization of politics, the expansion of a market economy, and the growing authority of an entrepreneurial, urban middle class.” The development of wire services required more neutrality to meet the publishing needs of a broader variety of news organizations.²¹³

Objectivity is based on the belief that facts and values can be separated and that facts can be independently validated. Values, on the other hand, are individual preferences, and, thus, are subjective. “The belief in objectivity is a faith in ‘facts,’ a distrust of ‘values,’ and a commitment to their segregation.”²¹⁴ After World War II, the rules and procedures of the journalism profession became the yardstick by which facts were measured. “Facts here are not aspects of the world, but consensually validated statements about it.”²¹⁵

Schudson and Anderson build on Schudson’s work to argue “that [for journalists] objectivity acts as both a solidarity enhancing and distinction-creating norm and as a group claim to possess a unique kind of professional knowledge, articulated via work.”

They argue that professional journalists do not have special expertise to “discern the ‘objective truth’ about reality.” Instead they have the “jurisdiction” over collecting information and the “attitude” to willingly “subordinate the views of the journalist to the voices of their sources.”²¹⁶

²¹³ Schudson, 1978, 4.

²¹⁴ Ibid, 5.

²¹⁵ Ibid, 6-7.

²¹⁶ Michael Schudson and Chris Anderson, “Objectivity, Professionalism, and Truth Seeking in Journalism,” in *The Handbook of Journalism Studies*, ed. Karen Wahl-Jorgensen and Thomas Hanitzsch (New York: Routledge, 2009), 99.

Many of the problems that developed between Southern Baptist journalists and leaders centered on “jurisdiction” of information, especially when the information was wrapped in theology. Editors, particularly those with theological training, found subordination to “the voices of their sources” difficult, especially when convention administrators voiced a different theological position. Southern Baptist journalists saw objectivity as a mark of professionalism. However, they also adhered to the Baptist principle of the priesthood of the believer. As believers—and as editors—they had a spiritual obligation to interpret events, at least in their editorials.

Objectivity as “the emblem of American journalism” held sway by the 1960s.²¹⁷ However, Nord believes the concept grew from early Protestant theologians. “The first American ‘journalists,’ the seventeenth-century Puritan ministers and almanac writers..., had no doubt that facts could speak, for they spoke for the God who made them.”²¹⁸

Muñoz-Torres agrees the concept of “value-free facticity” is common to most “objectivity” definitions, generally entailing the absence of bias and relying on journalists who remain “neutral.” He also acknowledges what he calls the “ethical side” of objectivity—balance and fairness. In other words, he challenges the understanding of “truth.”²¹⁹ Often considered the “founding principle of professional journalism,” the concept of “journalistic objectivity” or “objective truth” is underpinned by a set of norms—truthfulness, factuality, completeness and accuracy.²²⁰ Finding the truth through

²¹⁷ Schudson, 1978, 9-10.

²¹⁸ Nord (2001), 5.

²¹⁹ Juan Ramón Muñoz-Torres, “Truth and objectivity in journalism: Anatomy of an endless misunderstanding,” *Journalism Studies* 13, no. 4 (2012), 569-570, doi: 10.180/1461670X.2012.662401.

²²⁰ Tumber and Prentoulis, 63-64.

the facts is a function of public debate, the public forum model of journalism. The understanding of tolerance grew out of “the conviction that the truth will emerge and prevail in debate, in dialogue” — “a faith in fact” and “a faith in argumentation in the public forum.”²²¹

The ideal of truth-telling became the foundation for moral community. Collective interest and community service developed as news values followed an emphasis on moral community. News professionals are to serve the community, as well as their personal interests.²²² The dual roles of public service and watchdog over authority balance each other to help sustain the American democratic vision,²²³ journalism’s social responsibility role. Tumber and Prentoulis see “the ‘objectivity,’ ‘neutrality’ and social responsibility claims of journalism [as the] characteristics that give it a ‘professional’ grounding and a special role within political and public life.”²²⁴

In the past, journalists were admonished to consider facts as objectively as possible and to remain detached from sources and stories.²²⁵ Gans identifies ideology primarily with political and intellectual leanings that have no place in the newsroom.²²⁶ He relies on the understanding of explicit or implicit values as the primary guide for

²²¹ Nord (2001), 6-7.

²²² Matthias Revers, “Journalistic professionalism as performance and boundary work: Source relations at the state house,” *Journalism* 15, no. 1 (2014), 38-39, doi: 10.1177/1464884913480459.

²²³ Meryl Aldridge and Julia Evetts, “Rethinking the concept of professionalism: the case of journalism,” *British Journal of Sociology* 54, no. 4 (December 2003), 548, doi: 10.1080/0007131032000143582.

²²⁴ Tumber and Prentoulis, 63.

²²⁵ Herbert J. Gans, *Deciding What’s News: A study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek, and Time* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1979), 184-185.

²²⁶ *Ibid*, 29, 190.

journalists individually and within the newsroom culture. However, Koltoko-Rivera defines the ideological approach journalists pursue in the newsroom as a “worldview.” At its basic, “a worldview is a way of describing the universe and life within it, both in terms of what is and what ought to be.”²²⁷ Each worldview includes assumptions that are considered inviolate, whether or not they can be proven. Those assumptions “provide the epistemic and ontological foundations for other beliefs within a belief system.”²²⁸ Values and beliefs grow out of the worldview to which either the individual or the organization adheres. The pursuit of “what ought to be”—whether in social justice, morality, or other societal issues—is the heart of advocacy journalism. Advocacy journalism encompasses any form that “[pleads] another’s cause or [argues] in support of an idea, event or a person.”²²⁹ It includes reporting classified as “muckraking,” “crusading,” “alternative,” “activist,” “peace journalism,” “civic advocacy,” and “interpretive.”²³⁰ Religious journalism tends to support the cause and ideas of faith traditions, with newswriters and editors tending to include “subtle or obvious editorializing” in their stories. Objectivity no longer holds the same meaning.²³¹ Southern Baptist journalism never has totally fit into the “advocacy” category. Instead, it most often has blended news, public relations, and advocacy, choosing to advocate only for or against certain social issues. It always has

²²⁷ M.E. Koltoko-Rivera, “The psychology of worldviews,” *Review of General Psychology* 8, no. 1 (2004), 4, doi: 10.1037/1089-2680.8.1.3.

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ C. Fisher, “The advocacy continuum: Towards a theory of advocacy in journalism,” *Journalism* 17, no. 6 (2016), 712, doi: 10.1177/1464884915582311.

²³⁰ Ibid, 714.

²³¹ M.M. Galander, “Al-Jazeera, advocacy and media value determinism: Re-conceptualizing the network’s coverage of the Arab Spring of revolutions,” *Global Media Journal* (Spring, 2013), 7.

advocated for mission endeavors.²³² Most of the time, it has decried social behavior Southern Baptists considered unacceptable, ranging from alcohol consumption to gender issues to women's roles. Southern Baptist journalists of the study period defined the values of truth and objectivity differently than did their mainstream counterparts, primarily because they started with the Christian gospel as their definition of truth.

Ideology is expressed in the newsroom and through the news as values. No standard list of news values exists among mainstream media, though some are held in common. Salience or newsworthiness is the thread that links the news values an organization uses to make decisions about the stories to be used.²³³ Commonly held values usually are not explicit but are implicit within newsroom culture and journalists' activities and routines.²³⁴ Gans defines news values as "preference statements about nation and society and major national or societal issues," and he classifies them as "topical" or "enduring." Topical news values are specific to a person, event, or moment, while enduring values permeate news stories over time. Gans categorizes news values into eight clusters, including "social order," which he defines primarily as disorder,²³⁵ and includes moral disorder. He saw news as reformist, "what ought to be."²³⁶ Religious leaders, including journalists, also consider "what ought to be" within their interpretation

²³² Greg Warner, "Baptist Press: What do the firings mean for the Baptist press?" In the Baptist Public Relations Association Newsletter, September 1990, 6-8. The Southern Baptist Controversy Collection, 1980-1995. Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives.

²³³ Fisher, 715.

²³⁴ Gans, 39-40.

²³⁵ Ibid, 52.

²³⁶ Ibid, 68.

of specific religious tenets. Southern Baptist journalists had difficulty determining and often disagreed about the “oughts” during the Civil Rights Movement and the conservative shift.

To impact society, ideology or worldview must have the means to distribute its values to society. Both sides in the conflicts studied sought to impact laypeople through the Baptist press. State Baptist newspapers and the convention’s news service were that means for leaders. Often, leaders saw themselves as the arbiters of the denomination’s point of view. They saw themselves as the most reliable source of Southern Baptist ideology, as the most able to interpret Protestant Scripture and to determine God’s will for the convention as a whole.

At every stage since the Southern Baptist Convention began in 1845, leaders seemed to assume that the word “truth” held the same meaning for everyone, from the SBC executive secretary/director to the average member in the church pew. Convention leaders tied most decisions to evangelism, with the Christian gospel of Jesus as its ultimate priority. The definition of truth for Southern Baptists was (and remains) grounded in the character of God as Jesus articulated in John 14:6— “I am the way, the truth, the life....”. Much of the tension within the convention stemmed from an inability to separate political and theological interpretations of the Bible. Like their mainstream counterparts, Southern Baptist journalists tried to follow an objective pursuit of truth or to objectively describe it. Reedy notes that twentieth-century journalists tried to offer facts and opinions the public would need without giving value judgments. Before the Enlightenment, people believed “they knew the truth with such certainty that it would be foolish to permit the publication of error.” But Enlightenment philosophers insisted that

only the “pure” facts should be published.²³⁷ The Southern Baptist press was caught between “pure” facts and “pure” truth. Fundamental-conservatives employed what moderate-conservatives described as “selective” literalism. They dismissed some Bible references as either cultural or symbolic. Scriptures considered prophetic were often described as symbolism by premillennialists. Bible passages that refer to women covering their heads in worship or of slave-owning believers were dismissed as “no longer applicable.”²³⁸

Interestingly, the Southern Baptist Press Association minutes rarely reflected discussions of the meaning of truth. Instead, SBPA members tied truth, ethics, and objectivity together. They often assumed “truth” meant the gospel message. In a presentation to the SBPA in 1951, Clifton J. Allen assumed truth as the gospel when he asked, “What is our responsibility as Christian editors, as those entrusted with a medium for the presentation of the eternal gospel and its application to the life of the world in our generation? How can we help to guarantee the victory of the right ideas, of truth?”²³⁹ John Merrill, a professor in the Texas A&M University journalism department in 1964, approached truth from a polytheistic point of view. He believed that religious news media had to recognize the individualism of lived religion and, for that reason, had to deal with the nature of God. “The relativity of individual concepts of God is an important principle for the religious journalist to grasp.” Merrill pointed out to the SBPA that “values are

²³⁷ George E. Reedy, “Journalistic Ethics: Can Fairness and Objectivity Be Achieved?” in *Reporting Religion: Facts and Faith*, ed. Benjamin J. Hubbard (Sonoma, Calif.: Polebridge Press, 1990), 159.

²³⁸ Ammerman (1990), 84.

²³⁹ Clifton J. Allen, “Denominational Strategy in the Field of Religious Journalism,” presented at the Southern Baptist Press Association annual meeting in Tampa, Florida, February 14, 1951. SBPA Records.

relative,” even for religious newspapers, and that each individual lies somewhere on a vast “belief-value continuum.”²⁴⁰

Merrill challenged Southern Baptist editors again in 1979 by focusing on truth in editorials. “Truth is an especially difficult problem in journalism—not just in mundane matters of trying to present the news, but especially in matters of an editorial nature that impinge on ethics. Just what, in every case, does ‘being truthful’ mean?” he asked. Merrill tied truthfulness to ethical action and individual motives. He challenged the editors to write in such a way that provides “as complete a concept as possible” of the editorial topic so that readers could understand it and be able to respond to it. Even in their editorials, the journalists should be truthful, unbiased, and fair. He told them to “[r]espect the truth. Seek the truth. Write the truth.”²⁴¹ Merrill acknowledged that editors of Christian publications walk a fine ethical line because of their faith. Christian editors should follow a “synthesis ethical stance—a synthesis of Kantian ‘duty’ ethics and teleological ‘consequence’ ethics.” They should “feel a sense of duty to such ethical concepts as ‘truth,’ ‘balance,’ ‘fair play,’ etc.” But they also should feel that they could deviate from applying strict principles, as long as they used their intelligence and Christian conscience. “I would, for example, be dedicated to truth, but—for the sake of what I considered a higher good in a particular case—I would be willing to refrain from

²⁴⁰ John Merrill, “Obstacles Facing the Religious Journalist,” presented at the Southern Baptist Press Association annual meeting in Houston, Texas, February 1964. SBPA Records.

²⁴¹ John Merrill, “The Editor as Editorialist,” presented at the Southern Baptist Press Association annual meeting in Anchorage, Alaska, February 15, 1979. SBPA Records. At that time, Merrill was a professor at the University of Missouri.

telling the truth.” Motive, rather than consequences, is most important, he told the editors.²⁴²

Norman Jameson defines truth as “verifiable, factual truth...the ability to verify claims.” Journalists at Baptist Press, where Jameson was a feature writer from 1977 to 1982, tended to rely on denominational sources for news. “We might have gone too far to believe their claims. If someone of stature said it, we assumed the truth of it. If a denominational leader said it, we assumed it as true.”²⁴³ A Baptist journalist in several positions from 1950 to 1988, Walker Knight defines a professional journalist as one who works “to find the truth and publish it; if there is another side, to present the other side. I felt that was the obligation.” He reported from the conviction that “the truth would eventually win out.”²⁴⁴

Although they had already incorporated the concept of objectivity in their approach to news reporting, by 1980 Southern Baptist leaders and journalists struggled with the definition of objectivity and which “facts” were relevant. They struggled with the balance between facts and unity. Georgia Baptist Convention Executive Director-Treasurer James Griffith believed the editors had to temper facts with their effect on the convention’s mission. “It is always necessary, in honorable journalism, to determine which facts are accurate, true, and authoritative.... And then, may I add another test which I think appropriate for any state Baptist editor? ... The question is: ‘Does it help or

²⁴² John Merrill, “Ethics in Handling News Copy,” presented at the Southern Baptist Press Association annual meeting in Anchorage, Alaska, February 15, 1979. SBPA Records.

²⁴³ Norman Jameson, Telephone interview, August 22, 2018.

²⁴⁴ Walker L. Knight, Personal interview, Atlanta, Ga., October 15, 2018.

hinder the work?”²⁴⁵ Griffith believed that facts that would hinder Southern Baptist causes should not be reported.

As then-Baptist Press news service news editor, Dan Martin recognized the limitations of objectivity. Journalists as “noble observers...pecking out wise and beautiful gems of absolute truth...just ain’t so,” he wrote in December 1980. “Opinion creeps in, no matter how hard it is avoided, and opinion destroys objective journalism.” Fairness should be the hallmark for Christian journalists.²⁴⁶ Leaders were still concerned about objectivity tempered with ethics when they established operating guidelines for Baptist Press in 1986: BP was “to be factual and fair, as objective as possible, staying not only in the bounds of legality but also at a high level of professional ethics.”²⁴⁷ And, long before FOX News used the phrase, SBC fundamental-conservative leaders asked for “fair and balanced treatment in the denominational press.”²⁴⁸ Through the conservative shift in the 1980s, the state papers and Baptist Press emphasized their commitment to “be fair, objective, and balanced.”²⁴⁹ As editor of the Georgia Baptist *Christian Index* in 1990, Al Mohler tied the state papers’ purpose to theology. “Our business is truth-telling, always

²⁴⁵ James N. Griffith, “The Role of the State Baptist Paper in the Eyes of the Executive Director,” presented at the Southern Baptist Press Association annual meeting, February 1980. Southern Baptist Press Association Records (Box 2, file 2.3).

²⁴⁶ Dan Martin, “Objective Journalism is a Myth ... Fair Reporting is Not,” in the Baptist Public Relations Association Newsletter, December 1980. Fields Papers (Box 12, file 12.18).

²⁴⁷ “Operating Guidelines for Baptist Press,” presented at the SBPA annual meeting, February 12, 1986. According to an exchange of letters between Bobby Terry (October 7, 1985) and W.C. Fields (October 14, 1985), the SBPA had a three-member committee that provided some input into the final version of the guidelines.

²⁴⁸ “A Conservative Southern Baptist Affirmation,” presented at the SBPA annual meeting. SBPA--Annual Meeting, 1988, SBPA Records (Box 1, file 1.13).

²⁴⁹ Letter from Alvin C. Shackelford to Judge Paul Pressler, dated September 7, 1988. SBPA Records, SBPA – Correspondence – Pressler, Paul.

dangerous, but we must be responsible, open to correction. We must be willing to bear the scandal of the cross and truth.”²⁵⁰ At the same time, John Sullivan, Florida Baptist Convention executive director, pushed for editors to help church members to “rally around truth.... Keep telling us to claim our future in a way that keeps telling the Gospel.”²⁵¹ A journalist’s understanding of truth affects his or her objectivity, Walker Knight believes. “If there was two sides to an issue, I felt obligated to give both sides some hearing.... I was guided by seeking after truth. I can’t use falsehood as a tool. I sought to show the truth as I saw it at the time,” Knight said.²⁵² Even as he was being criticized for his work as Baptist Press director, Al Shackleford continued to insist that articles the news service produced were “journalistically fair, objective, and balanced.”²⁵³

Conflict surfaced when denominational leaders insisted news operations meet a theological standard, with truth, balance, and fairness defined in theological terms, while news workers endeavored to meet a fact-based truth standard to show faith at work through the activities, purpose, and mission of the SBC and its members. Journalists’ desire to be professionals and the attempts to balance both concepts spurred training opportunities. From its inception, the Southern Baptist Press Association provided both informal and formal training to help bridge that conflict and push professionalization of

²⁵⁰ SBPA—Annual Meeting, 1990, SBPA Records (Box 1, file 1.15). Mohler, part of the fundamental-conservative faction, later became president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He made his remarks as part of a devotion he gave on February 16, 1990, during the SBPA annual meeting in Pine Isle, Georgia, February 14-16, 1990. Members present understood that Mohler’s comment, “scandal of the cross and truth,” as willingness to be criticized and ostracized as Christ was.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

²⁵² Walker L. Knight, interview by author, Atlanta, Ga., October 15, 2018.

²⁵³ Memorandum from Alvin C. Shackleford to Harold C. Bennett, SBC president and treasurer, dated April 12, 1990, SBPA—Correspondence—Shackleford, Alvin, SBPA Records. Shackleford repeated his view in another memo to Bennett on April 16, 1990.

the journalists and their papers. The SBPA's first full meeting included presentations about circulation and subscription rates.²⁵⁴ Nearly every annual meeting provided journalism training of some type, usually about practical concerns such as writing style, editorials, and types of news to cover. All meetings also included devotionals on a theological topic or on theology and faith applied to their journalism calling. In an effort to foster unity and cooperation, a leader from the national office or a state body often was invited to give a devotional or to present a paper on an assigned topic.

In addition, religious colleges, universities, and seminaries—including Southern Baptist affiliated institutions—added journalism courses to their curricula. Four convention-affiliated theological seminaries offered courses in 1958: New Orleans Baptist, Southern Baptist, Southwestern Baptist, and Southeastern Baptist. Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, affiliated with American Baptist Churches USA, also offered religious journalism courses. New Orleans Baptist and Southeastern Baptist seminaries included courses in radio and television writing as well.²⁵⁵ Southwestern seminary offered a master's of Christian education with an emphasis in communications in the 1980s and 1990s, ending it in the late 1990s or early 2000s. The SBPA provided summer workshops for state paper and other agency editors and staff from the mid-1950s through the 1980s. Baptist Press provided journalism seminars for college students in the early 2000s.

²⁵⁴ Junker, 18.

²⁵⁵ James E. Sellers, "Religious Journalism in Theological Seminaries," *Journalism Quarterly* 35, no. 4 (September 1958), 465.

Although journalism training had been provided from the association's beginning, Southern Baptist editors did not seek recognition or more independence as their mainstream counterparts did during the professionalization project in the 1920s. Instead, Southern Baptist journalists promoted the \$75 Million Campaign to raise funds for the SBC; championed formation of the Cooperative Program, the SBC's funding mechanism; and pushed either for or against a denominational statement of faith. Much of the editorial discussion about a statement of faith centered around ongoing concern over modernism, defined then as the scientific approach to knowledge. Most editors considered themselves as fundamentalists, believers in the "fundamentals of the faith." Most did not align with fundamental extremists, such as J. Frank Norris, C.P. Stealey, and W.B. Riley.²⁵⁶ Some beliefs these three men espoused, particularly Norris, later were adopted as part of the so-called conservative resurgence in the 1980s. The SBC democratic, congregational governance structure throughout its history did not hinder editors from participating in discussion, nor did leaders try to restrict editorial comment. Editors were active in state and national Southern Baptist committee work and served as representatives from their churches in state and national SBC business meetings. As the Southern Baptist Convention became more centralized in the late 1800s, the president had more direct control of the board of directors for each affiliated agency.²⁵⁷

²⁵⁶ Junker, 66-67.

²⁵⁷ The president names all members of the powerful Committee on Committees, which nominates all members of the Committee on Nominations. The nominations committee then, as its name implies, nominates the members of the SBC Executive Committee, the trustees of all boards, institutions, commissions, and standing committees. A subgroup within the convention gains control by getting its chosen candidate elected five years straight, which allows it to replace trustees as they rotate off the boards of the various entities. (Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention, *Annual of the 2018 Southern Baptist Convention, One Hundred Sixty-First Session, One Hundred Seventy-Third Year, Dallas, Texas, June 12-13, 2018* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Baptist Convention, 2018), 13, 18.)

Only a small group of Southern Baptist leaders publicly and vocally supported the Civil Rights Movement. Several leaders, including First Baptist Church of Dallas Pastor W.A. Criswell, openly opposed the movement through the 1950s, 1960s, and into the early 1970s. Neither side tried to force change through the governance structure. Many journalists, especially Walker Knight, worked through their publications, often standing up to internal criticism. “I saw Southern Baptists sinning—there’s hardly any other word for it—on race and other matters,” Knight explained.²⁵⁸ Change within the denomination took place slowly as leaders and messengers (delegates) to convention business sessions passed resolutions against racism, and Blacks were chosen for leadership positions.

Although it played only a minor role in civil rights, the SBC congregational form of governance was central to the convention’s further shift to the theological and political right. After electing their own to SBC offices in 1985, each following year fundamental-conservatives were able to slowly take control of agencies, particularly the affiliated seminaries, the publishing and media distribution arm, and the home and foreign mission boards. Those who considered themselves as more moderate (and who were tagged as liberals), including religious historian Samuel Hill and journalist Bill Moyers, left the convention. Moderates thought unity around the purpose and work, especially missions, would hold the convention together.²⁵⁹ But it did not. Baptist Press was under the Executive Committee umbrella, which might have allowed the fundamental-conservative faction to sweep out the director and editor much earlier. However, they had to wait until they had a majority on the committee to overrule EC members who supported the news

²⁵⁸ Walker L. Knight, Personal interview, Atlanta, Georgia, October 15, 2018.

²⁵⁹ Ammerman (1990), 139-143, 211-213.

service. Once they gained control of the SBC, fundamental-conservatives went to work in each state convention, following the same route through the congregational structure. They managed to secure control in every state body, except Texas and Virginia where the moderate-conservatives held off the attempt. Fundamental-conservatives started separate state conventions and separate newsjournals in those two states. From the late 1980s through the early 2000s, moderate-conservative state Baptist paper editors retired, resigned, or were forced out.

CHAPTER 3

“Trust the Lord and Tell the People”: Press Freedom & Baptist Journalists

Autonomy has been the most contested aspect of the professionalization of the Southern Baptist press. The editors generally supported SBC and state convention programs and ministries. But often they published information unfavorable to administrators and editorialized about issues. Their independence often was threatened when they challenged those in power in the organizational structure. When confronted, members of the Southern Baptist Press Association sometimes allowed the discourse to adjust their conception of their journalistic roles. At times, they held to their perceived prophetic and watchdog roles to stand against challenges.²⁶⁰ However, at other times, some journalists acquiesced to administrative demands, especially when those who refused to do so lost their positions. Editors were divided over both the Civil Rights Movement and the fundamentalist-conservative shift. Although some editors supported civil rights, the records do not indicate that any lost their jobs. However, several were pushed out as the fundamental-conservative faction tightened its hold, first on the SBC and then on individual state Baptist conventions. Control of a state convention meant control of the state newspaper.

The Protestant press has three historic roles: first, as the “responsible journalist” who tries to report the “objective truth” and seeks to place reader interest first; second, as the voice of religious or church-related movements; and third, as a type of alternative

²⁶⁰ Hanitzsch & Vos, 151. Some Southern Baptist journalists held to the watchdog role through the 1970s and 1980s as the fundamental-conservatives pushed for and then gained control of the Southern Baptist Convention structure.

press to consider issues from a faith perspective. As a voice and/or alternative, the Protestant press has a responsibility to present new ideas, encourage participation, and rally members to support movements and causes. Even though most Southern Baptist editors in the study period were sometimes caught between press freedom and denominational wrath, most claimed editorial freedom was “important to their mission.”²⁶¹

Several state Baptist papers were members of Associated Church Press during the study period and were influenced by decisions that body made. The ACP statement of ethics and standards of professional practice, adopted in 1983, emphasizes the need for journalistic autonomy. The community, both leaders and members, need press freedom, and religious publications should have editorial freedom. “That freedom and the integrity required of the religious press must be guaranteed if church members are to have confidence in the news and information they receive.” The ACP, which began as the Editorial Council of the Religious Press in 1916, calls for religious institutions not to censor, interfere, manipulate, encumber, or limit their publications. It also asks institutions to avoid retribution against publications.²⁶²

Just as with other aspects of journalistic professionalism, autonomy is difficult to define, because internal and external forces are at work.²⁶³ External autonomy considers

²⁶¹ Austin, 113, 115.

²⁶² Associated Church Press, theacp.org/for-members/.

²⁶³ Gunnar Nygren, Boguslawa Dobek-Ostrowska, and Maria Anikina, “Professional autonomy: Challenges and opportunities in Poland, Russia and Sweden,” *Nordicom Review* 36, no. 2 (2015), 80, doi: 10.1515/nor-2015-0018. Although these authors address autonomy of non-Western media, much of their insights can be applied to religious media in the West. Religious media might be classified as another media system or as a subgroup of the Western system under Hallen and Mancini’s media model classifications (Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini, *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics* (Cambridge:

the relationship of media to the authorities in a society, while internal autonomy deals with relationships within the media company or department.²⁶⁴ Freedom from some system structure allows journalists the potential to act independently. In a democracy, individuals need the information the news media can provide so that they can make sound decisions.²⁶⁵ Autonomy for Southern Baptist journalists can be supported on the basis of the convention's insistence that it operates as a form of democracy. Even though democracy relies on a free press,²⁶⁶ SBC leaders often sought to curb press freedom, either directly through its news service or indirectly through pressure on state convention leaders.²⁶⁷

Southern Baptist leaders were not alone in their desire to curb press freedom at various points in denominational history. In the 1970s, the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod refused to continue to financially support the News Bureau of the Lutheran Council in the USA because it did not like the stories the news bureau published about its battle over doctrine. The LCMS had co-sponsored the news bureau with three other Lutheran denominational bodies. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) also struggled with

Cambridge University Press, 2004). Exploring religious media as a system is beyond the scope of this dissertation but would be an enlightening study.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

²⁶⁵ Gal Ariely, "Trusting the Press and Political Trust: A Conditional Relationship," *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 25, no. 3 (2015), 364, doi: 10.1080/17457289.2014.997739.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 355.

²⁶⁷ Canipe (176) argues that Baptists have tied their identity to the state through their form of democracy and "moral investment" in American democracy. He insists that moderate Baptists have been primarily responsible through their articulation of religious liberty and the separation of church and state as Baptist theological and social ideals. Canipe argues that moderate Baptists have made "fidelity to the First Amendment...as a litmus test of authentic Baptist identity." However, Canipe fails to acknowledge that fundamental-conservative Baptists have tied Baptist identity to the American political system through fidelity to the Republican Party and "correct" response to certain political and behavioral policies, particularly abortion and economics.

its press adopting practices acceptable among mainstream journalists. In the 1980s, the denomination debated which meetings its news service could cover and “whether the practices of secular journalism are acceptable within church circles.” Each denominational battle saw supporters who argued that news services should serve the organization first. They insisted negative or controversial stories should not be published. Each battle also had supporters who argued that all news should be published. “Freedom of information...is a higher value than denominational peace,” they believed.²⁶⁸

Dichotomy of Dependence/Independence

Southern Baptist journalists struggled with the dichotomy of dependence/independence from the state papers’ beginnings. Although all the early state Baptist papers began as independent concerns, most editorially supported the state and national conventions. Two factors pushed independent owners to sell their papers to their state conventions: financial support and the state bodies’ desire to name an “official” paper to represent their interests. The SBC added its national voice to promote affiliation with the state bodies. The SBC’s denominational literature committee’s 1914 report to the annual meeting recommended that the denomination should own the papers, that each state convention should have an official paper, and that each state convention should have only one paper. Several privately owned papers served Baptists in some states.²⁶⁹ Throughout the 1910s and early 1920s, papers merged in some states, and state conventions each chose a single paper to represent them.²⁷⁰

²⁶⁸ Austin, 111-112.

²⁶⁹ Junker, 45.

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 52, 64.

Although state Baptist newspapers sought affiliation with SBC-affiliated state conventions, editors desired freedom to express themselves and to cover news they saw as important to laypeople. “Trust the Lord and tell the people” became a common watchword among Southern Baptist editors. They praised the birth of the Cooperative Program, the Southern Baptist Convention’s funding mechanism, in 1925, and supported its founding and growth. Even though they perceived the value of cooperative effort, the editors did not abandon a desire to retain journalistic freedom. The quest to adequately balance promotion and press freedom has been a framework in which Southern Baptist journalists have worked from the SPBA’s beginning, and one that has not been reached. Southern Baptist Press Association records indicate the struggle between seeking more support from the denomination and reporting even negative news began in its earliest days. In 1928, members pushed against providing a report to the SBC annual meeting. Although the minutes do not provide many details, editors likely had a spirited discussion following a paper presentation in which the author compared the independence of Baptist state-owned and privately owned newspapers. The presenter felt that editors under both types may have been similarly independent, but the minutes fail to indicate how much independence the editors felt they had.²⁷¹

The editors often vacillated between their commitment to support the denomination and to report on it. Addressing SBPA members at their annual meeting in 1933, Southern Baptist Convention President M.E. Dodd expressed his support for the editors. But he emphasized that the denominational paper should be used to promote the

²⁷¹ Southern Baptist Press Association Records, Minutes, 1926-1941 (Box 1, file 1.55). The author of the paper is identified only as Dr. Masters.

convention's work. The author of a paper presented in 1934 warned against making the state Baptist papers too promotional, yet, indicated the denomination should have "primary obligation" over the papers' "content and circulation."²⁷² At the SBPA annual meeting the following year, F.M. McConnell led a discussion about how far editors should allow state leaders to dictate their work. He declared they should not yield to dictation "and the brethren agreed with him," the secretary recorded. Editors discussed the role of the state papers, agreeing that they were to provide "information, indoctrination and inspiration." McConnell "stressed the fact that the real hope of Christian promotion lies in the denominational papers." In 1940, editors noted that the state papers "represent every phase of work in which Southern Baptists are engaged." For that reason, the papers were "[t]he mightiest single human agency in the promotion, development, and conservation" of the denomination's work.²⁷³ Southern Baptist state newspaper editors believed they had an obligation to comment on all aspects of American society, to "express their views on pending religious and social and governmental matters."²⁷⁴ However, SBPA members were somewhat divided over press freedom in 1942. R.F. Terrell declared in his presentation that "denominational ownership [had] blocked much of the discord that would have been sown," although the minutes do not indicate the nature of the problem. At the same meeting, presenter O.P. Gilbert, editor of

²⁷² Ibid.

²⁷³ Ibid.

²⁷⁴ O.P. Gilbert, Editorial, *The Christian Index*, October 17, 1940.

the Georgia Baptist Christian Index, told members they had liberty but lacked “sufficient courage to use” it.²⁷⁵

Concern about editorial independence might have triggered the confidential questionnaire the Southern Baptist Press Association circulated among its members in 1951 to determine how each state paper was controlled. The results noted the editors were operating under one of four plans. Considered the most preferred, Plan One featured a separate board of directors to oversee the paper, with the board answerable only to the messengers (delegates) at each state convention annual meeting. When the survey was taken, seven state papers already were operated under Plan One and twelve editors preferred it. The other three plans placed the paper under state executive board control. The editors who responded to the survey believed Plan One ensured press freedom, allowed more editorial freedom, and allowed more fairness. The editors called it “denominational control with editorial liberty.” They emphasized: “Baptists are the greatest advocates of freedom of the press. They should practice it.”²⁷⁶ Polled again in 1960, the editors continued to favor an independent board, separate from the state executive committee or board.²⁷⁷

But in 1958, the SBPA was given a spot on the SBC Inter-agency Council.²⁷⁸ The association’s minutes do not hint at the reason for the opportunity, especially since the

²⁷⁵ Southern Baptist Press Association Records, SBPA Minutes, 1942-47.

²⁷⁶ “Summary of Findings of Confidential Questionnaire to Editors,” 1951, Clifton Judson Allen Papers, Southern Baptist Press Association, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Nashville, Tenn.

²⁷⁷ Southern Baptist Press Association Records, SBPA Minutes 1958-65.

²⁷⁸ Ibid. A voluntary, advisory board, the Inter-agency Council was formally authorized as an SBC organization in 1958. It remained an advisory council that worked for coordinated programming and cooperative problem-solving. Council members came from the permanent commissions and boards. Representatives from the State Executive Secretaries Association and the Southern Baptist Press

editors' group has not been listed as an SBC agency or committee in its history. The convention had a state paper committee that included editors among its members. The editors may have viewed the position as a means to provide input, especially on financial and circulation support. Possibly either the SBC Executive Committee or the Inter-agency Council leaders allowed it because its news service, Baptist Press, was under the Executive Committee umbrella and a member of the SBPA. Or perhaps SBC leaders believed they could exercise more control. The convention proceedings for that year note the SBPA was allowed as an ex-officio member. Perhaps the council was attempting to provide at least some measure of openness the association sought. Regardless the reason, the SBPA representative had no vote on the council. In an address to the SBPA, Texas Christian University Journalism Department Chair Wayne Rowland tied press freedom, despite the boundaries religious institutions set, within the framework of lived religion. "True religion defends freedom of expression and sharpens men's sense of responsibility before God...."²⁷⁹

Resolutions on Press Freedom

The SBPA issued what appears to be its first resolution in support of freedom of the press at its annual meeting in February 1970. It broadly affirmed the ideal in reaction to major societal issues of the day: the war in Vietnam, student protests, gay rights, racism, women, and other issues. Editors "reaffirm[ed] the importance of the democratic

Association were added as ex-officio members to be observers and "to keep the states advised" of council activities and convention agencies' problems. (Southern Baptist Convention, Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention, Nineteen Hundred and Fifty-Eight, One Hundred First Session, One Hundred Thirteenth Year, Houston, Texas, May 20-23, 1958. (Nashville, Tennessee: Executive Committee, Southern Baptist Convention), 57-58.)

²⁷⁹ Wayne Rowland, "The Challenge of Christian Journalism in the Changing World," SBPA—Papers Presented—1962-1964, Southern Baptist Press Association Records (Box 1, file 1.58).

processes in our nation and especially to our own Baptist Constituency....” The resolution called on members to take responsibility for “courageous and accurate reporting as well as incisive appraisal of issues and problems.” In the 1970s, editors also pushed for greater access to convention committee and agency meetings, citing instances of executive sessions that should not have been closed.²⁸⁰ Individual editors sometimes opined in their papers for autonomy, especially in defense of Baptist Press. “A democracy cannot function properly without an informed public opinion,” Oklahoma Baptist Messenger Editor Jack Gritz wrote. “Baptist Press and the state Baptist papers perform a vital role in making our Southern Baptist Convention democracy work.”²⁸¹

Members passed another resolution on press freedom at the 1972 annual meeting. Again drawing from the democratic ideal, members declared through the resolution that none of the publications by itself could speak for all Southern Baptists. The resolution also called for editors to be protected against manipulation, “however well-intentioned or guileless that manipulation may appear on the surface.”²⁸² The Arkansas state executive director had stepped in as interim editor at *The Arkansas Baptist*, an incident that stirred up the editors. R.G. Puckett, editor of *The Maryland Baptist*, wrote an editorial, which he later decided not to publish, decrying the Arkansas incident. “[A]ny time an executive

²⁸⁰ By 1980, the United Methodists had a “sunshine” law in place that required all denominational meetings to be public, except when discussion involved property transactions or personnel issues. Agencies were required to publicize in advance when a session would be closed, and they had to release a report following the session. The denominational law allowed journalists with its national publication, United Methodist Reporter, access to most meetings. Roy H. Beck, *On Thin Ice* (Wilmore, Kentucky: Bristol Books, 1988), 80.

²⁸¹ Reprint of Jack Gritz’s editorial as it appeared in the January 23, 1971, issue of the North Carolina Baptist *Biblical Recorder*, Fields Papers (Box 96, file 96.57).

²⁸² SBPA – Annual Meeting – 1972, Southern Baptist Press Association Records (Box 2, file 2.2).

secretary dabbles in the internal affairs of a state Baptist paper it ceases to be a free voice of the people and becomes a house organ for the power structure....”²⁸³

The editors called for the dissolution of the national convention’s Committee on Baptist State Papers in 1973, but the records do not disclose the reasons, other than that the committee had “served its usefulness.” That year, members also passed another resolution on press freedom, resolving “to protest any restrictions regarding freedom of the press.”²⁸⁴ National press coverage of the Watergate scandal in 1973 prompted at least one Baptist editor to draw parallels to the state papers. “The part played by the free press in the exposure of the Watergate scandal should serve as a valuable lesson to Americans and also to Baptists,” Kentucky Western Recorder Editor Chauncey R. Daley declared. After pointing out the role mainstream journalists played in exposing the scandal, he asked, “Who will insist on getting the truth and telling it when all is not well with Baptist organizations, agencies and institutions?” He acknowledged restrictions the state papers faced because of their denominational ties, but insisted editors needed “a proper degree of freedom” to be able to expose possible “Baptist Watergates.” Allowing the state editors freedom would “put freedom of the press on a par with such essentials as freedom of religion.”²⁸⁵

Occasionally, the editors recognized the limitations the state and national bodies placed on the papers. In a 1954 editorial as a response to a student problem among North

²⁸³ R.G. Puckett, “Progress, proff and problems,” Southern Baptist Press Association, 1972, Fields Papers (Box 96, file 96.57). In an undated letter to W.C. Fields, Puckett explained he wrote the editorial in “a heated, weaker moment,” but that he did so because [t]he Arkansas situation affects all of us.” He requested a press freedom resolution be presented at the 1972 annual meeting.

²⁸⁴ Southern Baptist Press Association Records, February 1973 minutes.

²⁸⁵ Chauncey R. Daley, “A Lesson For Americans And Baptists,” *The Christian Index*, May 31, 1973.

Carolina Baptists, Christian Index Editor John J. Hurt pointed out that editors' autonomy was limited, and that denominational loyalty had to take precedence. "Baptist editors are not completely free, however much they may cherish freedom of the press. They have the freedom to criticize, and much more, but their loyalty must be to their denomination or they travel under false colors." Hurt added that "responsibility," not freedom, should guide decisions. "The pastor, the editor, the professor and others can either shoulder their responsibility or find one more to their liking."²⁸⁶ Another Georgia Baptist editor echoed the restriction but from the perspective of control, rather than loyalty. Even though editors proclaimed editorial freedom and "prophetic independence, ... the blunt truth is that every one of our papers exists by and for a sponsoring Baptist body and we are totally subject to the whims and programs of those bodies.... I am not independent, and I know it; neither are you," *Christian Index* Editor Jack Harwell declared at the 1974 Southern Baptist Press Association's annual meeting.²⁸⁷

The Southern Baptist Convention did not have direct input into the individual state papers, but it could exercise some control over publications of its affiliated agencies. The national body often tried to restrict stories about Blacks in its Home Mission and Foreign Mission boards' national magazines and the Baptist Sunday School Board age-level curricula and magazines through the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. The Baptist Sunday School Board had a list of race-related words that could not be used in Sunday school literature and training materials. Some references to African Americans also were not

²⁸⁶ John J. Hurt, "Bugaboo of Freedom," *The Christian Index*, April 29, 1954.

²⁸⁷ Jack Harwell, "Role of an Editor in Baptist Life," SBPA, 1974, Southern Baptist Press Association Records (Box 2, file 2.2).

allowed. The SBC Home Mission Board was forced to withdraw *The Long Road*, a book published through the Baptist Sunday School Board around 1955 that told the story of African-American Baptists. At the time, the Home Mission Board was helping the National Baptist Convention with some funding.²⁸⁸ In November 1971, the Sunday School Board destroyed 140,000 quarterlies with a photo of a blond-haired white woman and an African-American man on the cover. The story was reedited to remove controversial words and content.²⁸⁹

The push for press autonomy heated up as the tension between fundamental-conservatives and moderate-conservatives increased in intensity through the 1970s and 1980s. Jack Gritz, editor of the *Oklahoma Baptist Messenger*, was the first editor to be dismissed from his post. The SBPA minutes do not provide details, except to note that the association's press liaisons committee would discuss the news service's role in covering controversial stories with then-SBC Executive Secretary Harold Bennett.²⁹⁰ The association passed a resolution of appreciation for Gritz at its 1980 annual meeting in February. Al Shackleford, SBPA president that year, noted other editors were under fire. An attempt had been made to remove Harwell at *The Christian Index* in Georgia, and "rumors" had been circulating that the executive board of the Tennessee state convention

²⁸⁸ Walker L. Knight, personal interview, Atlanta, Georgia, October 15, 2018.

²⁸⁹ Floyd Craig, telephone interview, September 19, 2018. Craig worked in communications for the SBC Christian Life Commission from 1967 to 1979. He helped raise funds to start Associated Baptist Press in 1990. Race relations among churches was one of Craig's duties while at the Christian Life Commission. Some of his work resulted in death threats.

²⁹⁰ SBPA – Annual Meeting – 1979, Southern Baptist Press Association Records (Box 2, file 2.2). The minutes record Gritz's leaving as a dismissal. However, the Baptist Press news service packet for September 14, 1979 included the story, "Jack Gritz Retires Early in Oklahoma," which reported that the board of directors of the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma approved a motion that Gritz "retire early." His "retirement" took effect on September 11. (Baptist Press news packet, September 14, 1979, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives online, accessed March 14, 2019.)

would censure its editor. A fundamental-conservative “alternative” state paper had been started in Virginia.²⁹¹ The Georgia conflict showed that the editors could not predict what roles their papers would play in the future “because of administrative attempts to define the paper in terms of promotion,” Harwell said. The editors passed a resolution of support for the Georgia editor, noting that he and his family had “undergone intense suffering as a result of unfair criticism.”²⁹² The fundamental-conservative faction pushed more intently against Baptist Press and the state papers throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

The desire for news and the broader access the news service had at the national level formed a strong professional bond between Baptist Press and the state papers. The state Baptist editors relied on the news service for more information about the national convention’s agencies and committees and coverage of their meetings. The news service relied on the editors for information about and coverage of state events and issues that might have been of importance to or of interest to the broader Southern Baptist community.

Baptist Press was established in response to a growing desire for access to more news. The forerunner of the news service began as a project Porter Routh, a professional journalist,²⁹³ initiated in 1945 while employed at the SBC Baptist Sunday School Board Department of Survey and Statistics. Southern Baptist Press Association members first broached the idea of a formal news gathering system in 1919 when the Committee on the

²⁹¹ Al Shackleford, “President’s Address: The President on the Press,” SBPA 1979-80 Annual, Southern Baptist Press Association Records (Box 2, file 2.2).

²⁹² SPBA Minutes 1980, Southern Baptist Press Association Records (Box 2, file 2.3).

²⁹³ Junker, 97.

Advisability of Establishing a Southern Baptist Press Bureau reported to the SBC annual meeting. The committee recommended further study, and the convention took no action. The possibility of a news bureau was incorporated into the 75 Million Campaign Conservation Committee in 1924 to continue publicizing the effort to raise \$75 million for the convention. However, the committee never fully functioned and the Cooperative Program, the SBC's funding mechanism, replaced the 75 Million Campaign in 1925. Again, no direct action was taken to develop a broader news function. In 1934, the editors again requested a news service to assist with news gathering from the national body and as a means for editors to more efficiently share news of their states. However, the convention failed to respond. The SBC Committee on Baptist Papers recommended a "Southwide News Agency" after surveying editors and readers in 1938, but, once again, nothing was done.²⁹⁴

A former editor of the Oklahoma Baptist Messenger, Routh understood the editorial need for news. He also was part of SBPA discussions in the 1930s about news and suggestions that doctrinal material needed to be balanced with practical items and Baptist and mainstream news. The association had already started providing informal training in news gathering.²⁹⁵ Additionally, readership surveys in 1938 and the early 1940s indicated that laypeople, rather than just ministers, were reading the state papers. The editors began to view their state publications more like mainstream newspapers than house organs.²⁹⁶

²⁹⁴ Junker, 77, 79.

²⁹⁵ SBPA Minutes, 1926-1941, Southern Baptist Press Association Records (Box 1, file 1.55).

²⁹⁶ Junker, 83-84.

After Routh took the Sunday School Board position, several editors began to request he gather and send them information. In response, he developed two information channels — The Survey Bulletin, a compilation of “facts from the secular and religious world,” and weekly news releases that were tagged as coming from the Southern Baptist Press Association.²⁹⁷ The information plan was transferred to the SBC Executive Committee in 1946, and in 1947, it was named Baptist Press. Because Baptist Press was established as a division of the SBC Executive Committee, no provisions for it appeared in the convention’s Annual Proceedings, nor did it issue a report to messengers (delegates) to the annual meeting. The only stated connection between the Executive Committee and Baptist Press was a reference in the convention’s bylaws for a public relations advisory committee that included a member from each convention agency, state convention, and state Baptist newspaper.²⁹⁸ In 1947, C.E. Bryant, listed as director of publicity for the convention, became Baptist Press head.²⁹⁹ Albert McClellan became

²⁹⁷ Ibid., 97.

²⁹⁸ The convention’s bylaws in 1946 tasked the Executive Committee to “conduct the general work of promotion and the general work of publicity for the Convention in co-operation with the other agencies and institutions of the Convention. (Southern Baptist Convention, Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention, Nineteen Hundred and Forty-Six, Eighty-Ninth Session, One Hundred First Year, Miami, Florida, May 15-19, 1946. (Nashville, Tennessee: Executive Committee, Southern Baptist Convention), 17.)

²⁹⁹ Southern Baptist Convention, *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention, Nineteen Hundred and Forty-Seven, Ninetieth Session, One Hundred Second Year, St. Louis, Missouri, May 7-11, 1947.* (Nashville, Tennessee: Executive Committee, Southern Baptist Convention), 3. The title changed from time to time. By 1980, it had become the public relations secretary. The Executive Committee’s promotion and publicity functions were still in place. It also was to name a public relations advisory committee, which included representatives from the “principal” agencies, the state conventions, and the state papers, to “advise the public relations committee of the Executive Committee and the public relations secretary on all aspects of the public relations service provided by the EC.” That year, the annual lists the Committee on Baptist State Papers as a special committee. The committee’s report lists four recommendations. The third recommendation stated that Southern Baptist leaders would commit to three items, one of which was they would “[s]hare with the editors of Baptist state papers, at least in general outline, what they expect from these papers.” (Southern Baptist Convention, *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention, Nineteen Hundred and Eighty, One Hundred Twenty-Third Session, One Hundred Thirty-Fifth Year, St. Louis, Missouri, June 10-12, 1980.* (Nashville, Tennessee: Executive Committee, Southern Baptist Convention,

director in 1949. In 1955, Theo Summercamp, a professional journalist, was hired as the news service's first full-time newswriter. Wilmer C. Fields took over as director of the news service in 1959.

The 1950s and 1960s saw a more pronounced professionalization of the state papers. Several trained journalists joined the ranks as associate editors at the state level. Walker L. Knight was among the first editors with a degree in journalism, starting his Baptist career as associate editor at the *Texas Baptist Standard*.³⁰⁰ Two editors under whom he served during his ten years with the *Standard* credited him with elevating Baptist journalism.³⁰¹ Several journalists who started in the 1950s and 1960s credit the work of David A. Cheavens, Associated Press bureau chief in Austin, Texas, at the time. Cheavens was instrumental in starting courses in religious journalism at Baylor University in the early 1960s, following his retirement from AP.³⁰² Toby Druin graduated from the Baylor program in 1966, directed Baylor's news service for a few months, and then became associate editor at the *North Carolina Biblical Recorder*. He was among the

1980), 11, 188.) By 1985, the Baptist Press director's title had become assistant to the executive secretary and director of public relations for the Executive Committee. (Southern Baptist Convention, *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention, Nineteen Hundred and Eighty-Five, One Hundred Twenty-Eighth Session, One Hundred Fortieth Year, Dallas, Texas, June 11-13, 1985*. (Nashville, Tennessee: Executive Committee, Southern Baptist Convention, 1985), 244.) Alvin C. Shackleford's title was vice president for public relations, Executive Committee, in 1990. (Southern Baptist Convention, *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention, Nineteen Hundred and Ninety, One Hundred Thirty-Third Session, One Hundred Forty-Fifth Year, New Orleans, Louisiana, June 12-14, 1990*. (Nashville, Tennessee: Executive Committee, Southern Baptist Convention, 1990), 244-245.) At some point in the late 1980s, the Executive Committee eliminated the list of its duties from the annual. Instead, it pointed out that the EC operates by its own bylaws and maintains an "official organization manual."

³⁰⁰ Walker L. Knight, personal interview, Atlanta, Georgia, October 15, 2018.

³⁰¹ Junker, 98.

³⁰² Toby Druin, personal interview, Dallas, Texas, August 14, 2018.

first associate editors allowed to attend Southern Baptist Press Association meetings and claims to have been the first at the North Carolina Baptist paper to “pursue news.”³⁰³

Citing editors of state papers established in the late 1940s and early 1950s, Junker contends Southern Baptist editors were more concerned with “being servant and promoter of denominational programs” than in pursuing news. He saw the editors’ support of Baptist causes through their papers as evidence. However, a number of editors pushed for more news from a broader perspective.³⁰⁴ Georgia Christian Index Editor O.P. Gilbert had opined in 1940 the responsibility to comment on society and government affairs.³⁰⁵ Although Junker contends the editors had reached “a growing acceptance of and decreased frustration with their denominational role” through the 1950s,³⁰⁶ news and autonomy topics surfaced. John Hurt, then editor of the Christian Index, pointed out that the Baptist papers needed to include more news because of laypeople’s increased interest.³⁰⁷ Virginia Baptist Religious Herald Editor Reuben Alley, whom Junker tagged as “a maverick editor of his time,”³⁰⁸ believed editors should “stir up conflict, raise questions, and create debate” on important issues.³⁰⁹ Integration and other race issues increased the need for news.³¹⁰ The designation of the first Baptist Press bureau in

³⁰³ Ibid.

³⁰⁴ Junker, 99-100.

³⁰⁵ Gilbert (1940)

³⁰⁶ Junker, 100.

³⁰⁷ SBPA Minutes, 1952, Southern Baptist Press Association Records (Box 1, file 1.56).

³⁰⁸ Junker, 100.

³⁰⁹ SBPA Minutes, 1953, Southern Baptist Press Association Records (Box 1, file 1.56).

³¹⁰ SBPA Minutes, 1956, Southern Baptist Press Association Records (Box 1, file 1.56).

Washington, D.C., with W. Barry Garrett, associate director of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, as its first bureau chief,³¹¹ also indicates the editors' strong interest in providing more news in their state papers. Garrett had been editor of the Arizona Baptist state paper. Perhaps because of Garrett's work, Baptist Press was granted accreditation as a news agency in the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives galleries in 1961.³¹² The installation of a teletype network for Baptist Press was another step in professionalization and led to more emphasis on news in addition to evangelism and mission stories. The Christian Index reported the network was "believed to be the nation's first leased wire system for a religious group." Thirteen agencies, including the SBC Executive Committee, and twelve state conventions and their papers participated in the network and shared the expense. The Baptist World Alliance, a broad network of Baptist denominations across the globe, also took part.³¹³

Recognizing PR and News Functions

The formation of the Baptist Public Relations Association in 1954 added another layer of professionalization to Southern Baptist communications. Nine denominational agency representatives met in Nashville, Tennessee, on December 15, 1953, to discuss the possibility of forming an organization for all individuals serving the denomination in any communications capacity, including state paper journalists. The group held its organizational meeting the following year in conjunction with the SBC annual meeting on June 3 in St. Louis. Joe R. Abrams of the Mississippi Baptist Record was elected

³¹¹ SBPA Minutes, 1958-1965, Southern Baptist Press Association Records (Box 1, file 1.58).

³¹² Ibid.

³¹³ Ibid. and "Georgia On Southern Baptist Teletype Network," *The Christian Index*, February 25, 1960.

president.³¹⁴ The Southern Baptist Press Association considered the state papers and certain agency publications as its members, rather than the individual editors. SBPA meetings generally were restricted to editors and associate editors. Editors could be BPRAs members if they chose to do so.

Insisting that training should be a key component, the BPRAs held its first workshop in February 1955 in Fort Worth. The organization provided a mix of presentations by both mainstream and religious public relations and news professionals. Presenters included a television public service programming director, a seminary publicity director and associate professor of journalism, a bank vice president and public relations director, the Fort Worth Star-Telegram's Sunday editor, and the Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee's publications director, Albert McClellan, who also served as Baptist Press director.³¹⁵ In 1963, the association began an awards program, which included several categories for public relations, development, and news communicators.³¹⁶ The organization changed its name to Baptist Communicators Association in 1996 and continues to provide workshops and awards.³¹⁷

Baptist Press administrators counted the Baptist Public Relations Association as a contributor to the news service's success. "Baptist Press is a joint enterprise involving all Southern Baptists who work with the news and news media. The continuing alertness and cooperation of editors, public relations personnel, and administrators assures year 'round

³¹⁴ Cox, 20.

³¹⁵ Ibid., 21.

³¹⁶ Ibid., 38.

³¹⁷ Baptist Communicators Association, www.baptistcommunicators.org.

press coverage of the highest professional caliber,” Wilmer C. Fields noted in 1961.

Fields served as Baptist Press director from 1959 to 1987.³¹⁸

The state papers and Baptist Press were influenced by changes that took place in mainstream journalism in the 1960s and 1970s. Until the mid-1960s, mainstream reporters treated politicians with deference and tended to be complaisant.³¹⁹ From 1960, journalism culture changed as news gatherers became more critical of authorities, as they appeared to be more aggressive, as stories lengthened, as more non-political stories appeared on the front page, and as news became more contextualized.³²⁰ Commercial journalists turned to using a contextual approach to many stories, especially in investigative work and for social empathy stories, describing the processes as well as giving facts.³²¹ Contextual journalism has been described as interpretative, depth, explanatory, and analytical reporting, and long-form and social science journalism. The focus shifted from strictly facts to facts plus interpretation of and an examination of underlying causes. Fisk and Schudson describe empathy stories as those that tell about groups “not often covered in news stories” and that are designed to stir interest, compassion, or sympathy for those groups. The stories “often use personal experiences to highlight larger social problems.”³²²

³¹⁸ Fields Memo: Press Coverage of the State Conventions, December 1, 1961, Fields Papers. Fields participated in the Southern Baptist Press Association from 1956 to 1959 as editor of the *Mississippi Baptist Record*, and then from 1959-1987 as Baptist Press director.

³¹⁹ Katherine Fink and Michael Schudson, “The rise of contextual journalism, 1950s-2000s,” *Journalism* 15, no. 1 (2014): 4.

³²⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

³²¹ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

³²² *Ibid.*, 5, 10.

Although Baptist journalists changed their approach over a later timeframe than did commercial news organizations, they did begin to look more closely and probe more deeply into SBC and state convention actions. Coverage of the 1960 Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting was fact centered, with summaries of reports presented and sermons preached. The only statement beyond what took place or was verbalized during the meeting was recorded in the coverage of Billy Graham's appearance on May 20. Graham told attendees he planned to vote for "a man of experience and world stature." The Baptist Press news packet the following day included a story in which reporter Roy Jennings noted, "While he did not identify his 'experienced' candidate by name, observers to the Southern Baptist Convention where Graham gave the closing address agreed it was Vice President Richard Nixon."³²³

By 1970, issues that likely would have been reported in just a few paragraphs a few years earlier merited longer consideration. A story about the appearance of fifteen Black young people on the program at the 1970 SBC annual meeting in Denver, Colorado, rated fifteen paragraphs and did not include any contradictory words or platitudes from convention leaders. The story noted, however: "During the prayer most of the blacks held up clenched fists, a black power symbol."³²⁴ Stories also became more contextualized. In 1984, reporter David Wilkinson of Baptist Press led a political rally story with: "Speakers unleashed a verbal assault on abortion, public education, communism and 'secular humanism' during the first national convention of Concerned

³²³ Roy Jennings, Baptist Press news packet dated May 20, 1960. Accessed at <http://media.sbhla.org.s3.amazonaws.com/1048,20-May-1960.pdf>, March 17, 2019.

³²⁴ "15 Black Students Urge SBC To Live Up To Precepts," Baptist Press news packet dated June 2, 1970. Accessed at <http://media.sbhla.org.s3.amazonaws.com/3004,02-Jun-1970.PDF>, March 17, 2019.

Women for America, meeting in the nation’s capital.” Later in the story, Wilkinson wrote: “...CWA carefully avoids denominational distinctions in its membership...,” and “[t]he conference, dominated by speakers from the Reagan administration, often took on the trappings of a pro-Reagan political rally.”³²⁵ Phrases like “unleashed a verbal assault,” “carefully avoids,” and “took on the trappings of... a political rally” would not have been used in prior years.

By 1970, Baptist Press had ceased including verbatim copies of sermons and agency reports presented at each Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting. Instead, the news service issued summaries of convention action, sermons and speeches, and pre- and post-convention agency and committee meetings. The SBC public relations director set up and oversaw the press room; offered background material about the convention, its agencies, scheduled speakers, and issues; provided press credentials to Southern Baptist and mainstream media; and fielded questions or set up news conferences as part of his duties.

Some Southern Baptist communicators, especially editors and writers at the two mission agencies and at Woman’s Missionary Union, were adept at producing empathy stories long before it became a trend among mainstream news outlets. Most articles shared stories about individuals who had been directly impacted by Southern Baptist Convention mission efforts or agency programs. For example, the SBC Foreign Mission Board set up a network of press representatives in the mid-1980s in regions where

³²⁵ David Wilkinson, “Conservative Women’s Group Holds Political Rally,” Baptist Press news packet, September 18, 1984. Accessed at <http://media.sbhla.org.s3.amazonaws.com/5904,18-Sep-1984.PDF>, March 17, 2019. The story references are anecdotal examples only. It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to conduct a content analysis of Baptist Press and state Baptist stories published throughout the study period.

appointed missionaries served. Trained journalists, each appointed as a missionary to a region, coordinated news and feature coverage of countries in each region. Stories and photos were sent to the board's headquarters in Richmond, Virginia, and used in the Foreign Mission Board's publications and/or sent to Baptist Press for wider distribution.³²⁶ Stories from the Home and Foreign Mission boards often were designed to draw increased financial support for each board's yearly special offerings. Woman's Missionary Union utilized stories from both boards and published its own mission-related stories through its series of age-level magazines for women and girls. Baptist Press also funneled stories generated by institutions, including the Southern Baptist Convention-affiliated seminaries. Baptist Press became the primary means for getting stories from the agencies and boards to the state papers, and the opportunity for editors to share news and human interest about their states with others. Like its mainstream counterparts, Baptist Press expanded via news bureaus. By 1970, Baptist Press had five bureaus as part of its network.³²⁷

Baptist Press' importance as the convention's primary communications vehicle also allowed it to be used as a means for denominational influence. By virtue of their positions within the Southern Baptist Convention organizational structure and their

³²⁶ See Paul Rhodes, "Korea Missionaries Try 'Evangelism that Touches,'" Baptist Press news packet, May 17, 1985, as one example. Accessed at <http://media.sbhla.org.s3.amazonaws.com/6085,17-May-1985.pdf>, March 17, 2019. Because of my training and professional experience, I was among missionaries who were allowed to write and send reports from their country of service to the assigned regional press representative.

³²⁷ The news service led the European Baptist Press Service for a while in the late 1960s and at one time considered establishing the Asia Baptist Press Service in Hong Kong. Southern Baptist Press Association – Minutes, 1966-1969, SBPA Records (Box 2, file 2.1) and Southern Baptist Press Association – 1967, December 20, 1967 letter from Britt E. Towery, Jr. to W.C. Fields, Fields Papers (Box 96, file 96.51). Towery suggested establishing the Asian service, which apparently never materialized. No additional references show up in Fields' papers or the SBPA records.

religious authority granted by their theological training and pastoral experience, convention leaders had the power to attempt to control the denominational press. Controlling its press would have allowed SBC leaders to promote their interpretation of the Bible and their perspective on social issues. Denominational leaders influence adherents because lay members tend to agree with the denomination's directives and suggestions. As long as leaders could control or strongly influence its press, they could maintain consonance with members. The connection to members and their power within the denomination allowed leaders opportunities to reach church members. They tried to extend control of the discourse through the denominational press during and after the Civil Rights Movement, through the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Fundamental-conservative leaders for the most part succeeded in that effort by the mid-1990s as they pushed the convention further to the right theologically and politically. Southern Baptist journalists saw themselves as ministers through the press to share the gospel and to keep church members apprised of the convention's work. From the beginning, editors saw their role as prophetic to a certain degree. Later, they believed they had a watchdog role to play as well.

Baptist Press became an opportunity to influence discourse because it served the convention as a whole. It served as a go-between for news flowing from the national office to the states and from the states to the national body. The Southern Baptist Press Association minutes from the mid- to late 1950s indicate the association, Baptist Press, and the convention urged calm, prayer, and obedience to federal law. The state paper editors relied on Baptist Press to produce stories, especially after the 1954 Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*, that they could use because most felt they would

experience more backlash from readers if the editors produced their own stories.³²⁸ The SBC and most of its agencies stressed the resolution on race messengers passed in 1947, which “concentrated on the need for individuals to change their way of thinking.” In 1954, leaders emphasized that Baptist Press story, calling for calmness in the face of the Supreme Court decision was “in line with democratic and Christian principles the SBC had enunciated previously.” The convention’s Christian Life Commission was the only agency that “endorsed the Court decision forthrightly.”³²⁹ Baptist Press did not push coverage of the Civil Rights Movement but stayed in line with the convention’s lowkey approach. National convention leaders occasionally tried to block the SBC’s Christian Life Commission’s communications, and agency heads also intervened with editors of their related publications.³³⁰

Fundamental-conservative Southern Baptist leaders took a stronger stand against journalists, especially throughout the 1980s. They actively sought ways in which to undermine the convention’s news service and the state papers, concentrating on the news service first as part of the national body. Because Southern Baptists stress the concepts of the priesthood of the believer and the autonomy of the local church, fundamental-conservatives could not directly intervene in the state Baptist newspapers. Instead, they had to accomplish in the state conventions what they were able to do in the Southern Baptist Convention: gain administrative control of the individual state conventions.

³²⁸ Junker, 105-106.

³²⁹ Ibid., 105.

³³⁰ Walker L. Knight, personal interview, Atlanta, Georgia, October 15, 2018.

However, the credibility of the state papers could be tainted by accusations lodged against Baptist Press, because the papers used its stories.

For example, because of that possibility, the Southern Baptist Press Association authorized a study by three highly regarded journalism scholars after charges of bias and unprofessional reporting leveled against Baptist Press in 1984. In his preface to the report issued in February 1985, then SBPA president-elect Bobby Terry pointed out the connection, noting that neither Baptist Press nor the state papers were responsible for each other's work. "Yet, in the public image, Baptist Press news service and state Baptist papers are inseparably connected. Therefore, what happens to Baptist Press is of vital interest to the members of the Southern Baptist Press Association." The SBPA authorized the study for help to look at Baptist Press operations "as it related to the stories in question..." The report, which supported Baptist Press' professionalism, was presented to the SBPA, the SBC Public Relations Workgroup, and the SBC Administrative and Convention Arrangements Subcommittee in February 1985.³³¹

Baptist Press had been accused of bias against Houston Appeals Court Judge Paul Pressler, a Southern Baptist who supported the fundamental-conservative faction. In a recommendation, the workgroup and subcommittee reported the two stories "taken together...gave a balanced presentation of the news." However, because Baptist Press had released the two separately, members of the workgroup and the subcommittee determined the news service had followed an "unfortunate and untimely procedure." The

³³¹ Bobby S. Terry, "Preface" to "Report of Special Inquiry: Performance of the Baptist Press in news coverage of controversy over taping of Pressler/Durham telephone conversation and related matters" by Clifford Christians, John DeMott, and John Merrill, February 5, 1985. Southern Baptist Press Association Records (Box 1, file 1.10).

recommendation called for the SBC Executive Committee to “reaffirm its longstanding policy of openness in its deliberations and actions and reaffirm its support for a responsible and free press as an essential element for an informed Southern Baptist constituency.”³³²

Although the conflict between fundamental-conservatives and moderate-conservatives was most visible through the Baptist Press confrontation, disruption of the convention had brewed from the 1950s. Until the 1950s, southerners saw cultural and social change as a phenomenon of life in the North. “[T]o many southerners, including Southern Baptists, the enemy no longer resided without, as the ‘godless North,’ but had moved within, as secular or liberal America.” Southerners began to see “tensions, issues, and differences” as “more threatening and less tolerated.”³³³ The issues, including modern scholarship, civil rights, and feminism, led to debates over inerrancy and conflicts over culture. “Old tensions assumed new potent forms, bringing about the confrontations that ripped Southern Baptists apart.... Party politics trumped denominational loyalty.”³³⁴

Institutional Crisis

Hadden sees the 1960s as a time of struggle within the church as an institution to adapt to the changing world. The church faced three crises: of its meaning and purpose, in the traditional doctrines of faith, and in its authority.³³⁵ The civil rights, he contends,

³³² Executive Committee, Administrative and Convention Arrangements Subcommittee, Public Relations Workgroup. Minutes, February 18, 1985. Southern Baptist Press Association Records (Box 1, file 1.10).

³³³ Flowers, 2. Also see Ammerman (1990), 48-49.

³³⁴ Ibid., 3.

³³⁵ Jeffrey K. Hadden, *The Gathering Storm in the Churches* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1969), xxvi.

acted as the catalyst that set off the underlying conflict that had been building. The church had been seen as nothing more than “a place of comfort” that simply reassured Christians, rather than pushing members to make a difference. “Of all the areas of criticism, the lack of aggressive action in race relations has emerged as the most critical indicator of the church’s commitment to the status quo.”³³⁶ Some clergy stood for civil rights but as they did, some church members pushed back. The common complaint was that the church was “meddling in civic affairs.” They divided over the church’s purpose in society. Many clergy and some laypeople were “no longer content to see the church remain an institution where the socially and economically advantaged [could] seek comfort and reassurance that their view of the world is really right.” But others saw no need to “radically” change.³³⁷

The crisis in doctrine centered on uncertainty and doubt, as a “struggle...to find a meaningful theology” that would be relevant to an increasingly secular society. Some theologians saw the broader struggle over doctrine as the basis of the fundamental-conservative/ moderate-conservative split because the literalists had reached “consensus or near consensus” while those who saw symbolism and myth did not. Interpretation of scripture played a role as well.³³⁸ Religious power structures also shifted somewhat. The laity recognized its power to express itself and to withhold funding. Laypeople resented the clergy’s speaking out on issues, particularly on civil rights. They saw “the church as not an agent of change but as a buffer against it.”³³⁹ Some Southern Baptist pastors were

³³⁶ Ibid., 5-7

³³⁷ Ibid., 12-13.

³³⁸ Ibid., 16, 21.

progressive in the 1950s and 1960s, but most of those who valued the unity of the denomination avoided discussing civil rights “in terms of biblical justice or Jesus’ example.” Instead, they wrapped it “as a matter of good Christian citizenry.” SBC clergy who stood up for desegregation were “branded as infidels and liberals.”³⁴⁰

However, as the Southern Baptist political and theological conflict heated up, SBC leaders backed away from race issues. “[D]enominational conservatives were as eager as moderates to dispel any racist image.... [A] more constrained view of womanhood and woman’s ministry replaced hardened notions of race and attitudes toward racial desegregation, which fell out of favor after the 1960s.”³⁴¹ Flowers believes racism did not end. Instead, the Civil Rights Movement influenced the culture wars and the conflict within the SBC. Civil rights legislation was seen as government intervention, especially Supreme Court rulings on busing, legalized abortion, and bans on religious activities in the public square. Many churches relocated to the suburbs and supported separate schools, including Christian academies. They “accepted desegregation as an ideal” instead of as reality.³⁴²

Many Southern Baptist media workers believed their calling as religious journalists intensified their social responsibility to their readers and to the denomination. Others held to a regional view of Southern Baptists and hoped to retain a more conservative direction.

³³⁹ Ibid., 30-31, 222.

³⁴⁰ Flowers, 39-40.

³⁴¹ Ibid., 4.

³⁴² Ibid., 41.

CHAPTER 4

Race: Struggling with faith and practice

By the 1940s, the Southern Baptist press had developed aspects of professionalism. The Southern Baptist Press Association had been formed, a code of ethics based upon Protestant Christian theology had been developed, and both formal and informal training continued to be offered. Editors and journalists considered themselves as news workers, especially after the formation of the Southern Baptist Convention's news service, Baptist Press, which gave the state papers increased recognition beyond their state lines. Like their commercial counterparts,³⁴³ they tended to ignore Black activities, attitudes, and organizations. They generally did not report much about African-American Baptists, even those the SBC and its agencies assisted with education, missions, and funding. For some editors, the decision to either soft-pedal race coverage or ignore it all together was made in response to laypeople, rather than to institutional directives.

In some respects, Baptist news organizations resembled the mainstream press in the South. Although circulation of daily mainstream newspapers had grown, the number of newspapers had dropped through the 1940s. Many businessmen who took over some mainstream newspapers were not trained journalists but were part of corporate chains.³⁴⁴ Technically, the state Baptist papers did not belong to the Southern Baptist Convention, but SBC leaders could influence their editors by virtue of the religious authority they had.

³⁴³ Roberts and Klibanoff, Kindle location 219-246.

³⁴⁴ Ibid., Kindle location 720-732.

However, all papers related to their state conventions, either through direct control by the state executive board or through a separate newspaper board that answered to the state executive. Just as commercial news media did,³⁴⁵ state Baptist journalists hesitated to cover race-related news, especially outside denominational pronouncements and activity. Southern Baptist editors had to answer some of the same questions Roberts and Klibanoff note their commercial counterparts did: “Weren’t newspapers supposed to report accurately and factually? Objectively? Comprehensively? ... [T]he inability of many mainstream editors to achieve such basics in the charged atmosphere of hardening racial attitudes was not something about which journalists could be proud.”³⁴⁶ The Southern Baptist Press Association supported SBC resolutions on race, increased coverage of race through the period—primarily through coverage of meetings, agency reports, and contributed stories. However, editors were divided in their individual views on race and in the approach they took in their state papers.

Race issues and tensions divided Southerners and their clergy throughout the 1950s, the 1960s, and into the early 1970s. The Southern Baptist Convention did not come even partially to grips with its historical role in racial strife in the United States until it issued a formal denunciation of racism and an apology for condoning and perpetuating racism in 1995.³⁴⁷ Members elected an African-American pastor from Louisiana as its president in June 2012. Established as a result of disagreement over the

³⁴⁵ Ibid, Kindle location 732, 1282. The New York Times was the only national newspaper with a bureau in the South in the late 1940s and early 1950s and was the only national paper to regularly cover race issues (location 1257-1269).

³⁴⁶ Ibid., Kindle location 1356.

³⁴⁷ Southern Baptist Convention, “Resolution On Racial Reconciliation On The 150th Anniversary Of The Southern Baptist Convention, <http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/899/resolution-on-racial-reconciliation-on-the-150th-anniversary-of-the-southern-baptist-convention>. Accessed March 1, 2019.

slavery issue in 1845, the SBC infrequently addressed race issues until changes in federal law required leaders to do so. Southern Baptist leaders tended to couch their discussion of racial issues in terms of personal responsibility, rather than to deal with the convention's response as an institution. Whites and Blacks responded differently to southern religion. Whites tended to become conservative, while Blacks supported change. Harvey declares that the religious cultural difference between the two groups "provided the moral and spiritual force both for the Civil Rights movement and for the dogged resistance to it."³⁴⁸

Representatives of nine state Baptist conventions in the South, plus some from Tennessee and Washington, D.C., met in Augusta, Georgia, on May 8, 1845, to form the SBC after the refusal of the Triennial Convention's Home Mission Society to appoint a slaveholder as a missionary and its decision to create northern and southern divisions. Baptists in the South felt they were being treated with less respect than their northern Baptist brothers and sisters. Four more southern state conventions joined them by the time the Civil War broke out. Even with the end of the war, white Baptists in the South felt they could no longer work with those of the North. After it formed, the Southern Baptist Convention had only one "official" publication, a Sunday school tract.³⁴⁹ However, Baptist papers that had aligned with the new convention through the end of the nineteenth century supported the SBC in its teachings about slavery, the Confederacy, and segregation, which, consequently, legitimized slavery. Editors praised Confederate President Jefferson Davis at his death in 1889.³⁵⁰ By the early 1900s, most state Baptist

³⁴⁸ Paul Harvey, *Redeeming the South: Religious Cultures and Racial Identities Among Southern Baptists, 1865-1925* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 13.

³⁴⁹ Ammerman (1990), 35.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 36.

editors did begin to oppose lynching and support education for Blacks and mission work among them. Sometimes they used Blacks as a means to undermine other faith traditions, especially Roman Catholics.³⁵¹ However, they continued to stand against social equality between whites and Blacks.³⁵² The state editors pushed the idea that Blacks were recipients of Southern Baptist evangelism and missions zeal. Like most Southern Baptists, many editors held to paternalism and secondary status for Blacks.³⁵³ The convention needed the state papers to help continue what Leonard has described as “the Great Southern Baptist Myth” — that even though it was “the denomination of the defeated, the convention “had become God’s ‘last’ and ‘only hope’ for evangelizing the world according to New Testament principles.” The SBC’s growth and strong evangelism were “evidence of God’s blessing on its ministry, its mission, and its method....”³⁵⁴ The problems emancipated Blacks faced after the war convinced Southern Baptist whites that Blacks could not adapt to freedom and its privileges. “Thus most Southern Baptists, well into the twentieth century, accepted a biblical hermeneutic that sanctioned segregation as readily and uncritically as they had accepted divine approbation of slavery.” They had to maintain cultural control to justify their attitude about segregation. Biblical literalism allowed them to believe they had “divine support” to continue segregation.³⁵⁵

³⁵¹ Kenneth K. Bailey, *Southern White Protestantism in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1964), 105. Bailey cites the August 23, 1928, issue of the *Mississippi Baptist Record* in which the editor charges the Catholic Church with requiring Blacks to vote for Al Smith, presidential candidate who ran against Herbert Hoover in 1928.

³⁵² Junker, 41.

³⁵³ William M. Tillman Jr., “Baptists and the Turn toward Racial Inclusion: 1955,” in *Turning Points in Baptist History: A Festschrift in Honor of Harry Leon McBeth*, ed. Michael E. Williams, Sr. and Walter B. Shurden, 260-274. (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2008), 260.

³⁵⁴ Leonard (1990), 13.

Southern Baptist clergy were able to influence southern society from the 1790s through the 1960s, along with other religious leaders in the South. Together, “[t]hey provided social leadership ... in that they helped to create and legitimize Southern solidarity.” That attitude led most Southern Baptist Convention pastors and denominational leaders to maintain the social status quo or, at most, to take a gradualist position to promote change within the church and society. “These were men who supplied desperately felt needs among Southern whites for dignity, refinement, and consolation,” Hill maintains.³⁵⁶ However, Southern whites did not formulate as strong a biblical case as they had done to support slavery, and they were more divided over the political approach to enforce their cultural will. Both whites and Blacks were convinced God was on their side throughout the Civil Rights Movement.³⁵⁷

A new socio-religious movement that had taken hold by the late nineteenth century and into the twentieth century helped some white Christians consider a broader understanding of religion’s role in culture. Walter Rauschenbusch, considered the founder of the social gospel movement, believed the Christian gospel and social justice are linked. Reinhold Niebuhr followed in Rauschenbusch’s steps, holding to Christian realism, writing about injustice to Blacks, and promoting nonviolence as a tool for social justice.³⁵⁸ The gospel has to make as much difference in the practical areas of life as it does in the spiritual. The Civil Rights Movement was able to “organically [link]

³⁵⁵ Ibid., 21.

³⁵⁶ Hill, 204.

³⁵⁷ Mark A. Noll, *God and Race in American Politics: A Short History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 106; and David L. Chappell, *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 4.

³⁵⁸ Noll, 108.

traditional conservative theology and progressive social action,” something whites mostly were either unwilling or unable to accomplish.³⁵⁹

Although many scholars assume that Southern Baptists did not adopt the social gospel movement, Eighmy contends it “destroyed the uniformity of [Southern Baptists’] nineteenth century social thought and created two opposing interpretations of the church’s earthly mission.” Some leaders continued to hold the position that change could only come about through reformation of the individual, “a position that, in effect, usually upheld the values of the existing social order.” Others, though, accepted “the social-gospel doctrine of the corporate nature of evil.” Consequently, they “stressed the reformation of society and a concern for man’s earthly welfare.”³⁶⁰ That concern led them to push for reform within the Southern Baptist Convention. However, in general, American (Northern) Baptists concentrated on social issues, while the Southern Baptist Convention focused on evangelism. “The simple gospel of personal evangelism found wide appeal precisely because it was unencumbered by the demands of social Christianity,” Eighmy stressed.³⁶¹ He defines the social gospel as Christian ethics applied to industrialized society “and thereby inspired American Protestantism’s most productive movement for social reform.”³⁶² However, the Southern Baptist Convention called for a cut in social reform and a renewed emphasis on evangelism following World War I.³⁶³

³⁵⁹ Noll, 122-123.

³⁶⁰ John Lee Eighmy, *Churches in Cultural Captivity: A History of the Social Attitudes of Southern Baptists* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1972), x.

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*, xii.

³⁶² *Ibid.*, 57.

³⁶³ Bailey, 47-48.

Because no Southern Baptist Press Association minutes before 1926 exist, Baptist editors' response, as an organization, to Blacks after the Civil War are not recorded until 1929³⁶⁴ when the Southern Baptist Press Association minutes note that Dr. D.L. Haley had asked for and was given time during the meeting to share information about his work among southern Blacks. Haley told editors that African Americans needed help as they were "groping for light and leadership." He asked the editors to assist him to convince SBC leaders to seek representatives from the National Baptist Convention, the largest Baptist body for Blacks, to speak to the Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting that year and to send representatives to the NBC meeting. The editors endorsed Hailey's work and went on record to request the SBC to give the NBC at least twenty-five minutes on the SBC program.³⁶⁵ The SBPA invited Dr. Sutton R. Griggs, first president of the American Baptist Theological Seminary, to speak on "the Negro question" at its 1931 annual meeting. The minutes do not include any notes or comments about Griggs' presentation, or how it was received.³⁶⁶ However, minutes of the 1934 annual meeting

³⁶⁴ Some editors would have editorialized in their own state papers. Junker notes that most editors were "not very progressive in their social stands...." Most editors opposed lynching and spoke out against prejudice, "but could not tolerate social equality or mixing of the races" (73). Junker cites Patrick Henry Hill, "The Ethical Emphasis of Baptist Editors in the Southeastern Region of the United States 1915-1940" (diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1949), 273-275.

³⁶⁵ SBPA Minutes, 1926-41, Southern Baptist Press Association Records (Box 1, file 1.55). The minutes of the Southern Baptist Convention meeting in 1929 only indicate that National Baptist Convention President L.K. Williams brought fraternal greetings. Other fraternal messages were brought by Baptist World Alliance General Secretary J.H. Rueshbrooke of London and D.J. Evans as a representative of the Northern (later American) Baptist Convention. Apparently, the trade Dr. Haley and the editors sought did not happen. (Southern Baptist Convention, Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention, Nineteen Hundred and Twenty-Nine, Seventy-Fourth Session, Eighty-Fourth Year, Memphis, Tennessee, May 9-12, 1929. (Nashville, Tennessee: Southern Baptist Convention), 18.)

³⁶⁶ Established in Nashville, Tennessee, in 1924, the seminary was jointly operated by the SBC and the National Baptist Convention. The seminary offered classes in Memphis from 1916 to 1918. In 1921, it set up two governing boards to represent the two conventions so that both would continue to sponsor the school. The SBC board oversaw buildings and acquisitions, while the NBC furnished the buildings and provided support for the infrastructure and maintenance. The first building was constructed in 1923-24.

indicate the editors discussed the social gospel movement. Mississippi Baptist Record Editor P.I. Lipsey presented “Denominational Papers and Social Reform” about the racial problem in the South. Then-SBC President M.E. Dodd spoke, emphasizing that personal and social gospel first must be the “result of personal regeneration,” which is then “brought to bear on the problems of the day.” The records neither provide the discussion that likely followed the presentations, nor indicate whether the two presentations contradicted or paralleled each other.

Although minutes do not indicate the discussion that followed the presentation, editors likely talked about race among other topics after O.W. Taylor presented his paper, “The Relation of Religious Papers to Moral and Civic Questions” at the SBPA 1942 annual meeting. He insisted that the relationship was threefold: redemptive, reflective, and reformative. Although the minutes do not record much, likely Taylor used part of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount found in Matthew chapters five through seven, specifically Matthew 5:13-16 in which individuals who follow Jesus’ teaching are referred to as “salt” and “light” in the physical world. Taylor emphasized the state papers were obligated to discuss moral and civic questions from a spiritual perspective, rather than from a political point of view, and were to reflect God’s “light” from the Bible on those questions. The state papers’ reformative role meant they were to “apply saving salt to society and save it from corruption.”³⁶⁷ The editors would have understood Taylor as

Still in operation, the school was renamed American Baptist College in 1971. The SBC turned its portion of the school’s assets over to the NBC in 1996. See “American Baptist Theological Seminary” in the Tennessee Encyclopedia at tennesseencyclopedia.net/entries/american-baptist-theological-seminary/ and the list of archived materials for The Southern Baptist Commission on The American Baptist Seminary Records, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Nashville, Tennessee, at <http://www.sbhla.org/downloads/630.pdf>.

³⁶⁷ SBPA – Minutes, 1942-1947, Southern Baptist Press Association Records (Box 1, file 1.56).

interpreting the Scripture to mean they were to provide “good or pleasing flavor” and to act as a “preservative” to society through their words.

Most editors in the 1930s and 1940s did not pursue social change in their editorials. Most were pastors, rather than trained journalists. They tended to stay out of political issues, citing separation of church and state, and most held to the concept of personal responsibility. Many editors did not voice opinions about social change because they did not want to be considered “social gospelers.” Many Southern Baptists associated the social gospel with socialism or communism. Other editors saw the social gospel as a call for justice.³⁶⁸

A few state Baptist papers reacted more favorably toward desegregation than did others in the 1940s and early 1950s, among them The Arkansas Baptist, the North Carolina Biblical Recorder, the Tennessee Baptist & Reflector, and The Alabama Baptist.³⁶⁹ Southern Baptist leaders, editors, and many clergy supported desegregation. Even though the Southern Baptist Convention passed a resolution in support of desegregation in 1947, a number of individual churches and state conventions rebelled against the statement, including Mississippi Baptists, the Georgia State Baptist Convention, and some Baptists in Louisiana. Regardless of the stand pastors and SBC

³⁶⁸ Junker, 75.

³⁶⁹ Bailey, 144. Many state Baptist publications supported desegregation at first, but later, often under different editors, the tone and intent shifted to opposition. The *Alabama Baptist* is a prime example. Leon Macon, who served as *Alabama Baptist* editor from 1950 to 1965, was an open and vocal proponent of segregation and used the state paper to champion that cause. Macon also had considerable influence in the Alabama Baptist Convention, serving as that body’s president in 1964 and 1965. He attributed the South’s race issues to outside influences, especially the social gospel and communism. His editorials, “Birmingham’s Image” in the October 24, 1963, issue and “Communism and the Race Question” in the September 3, 1964, issue, are two of the many examples of his position.

entities took, large numbers of laypeople still held to the southern culture that separated races and continued to push for tradition, including segregation.³⁷⁰

Messengers (delegates) to the Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting in 1947 approved a report of a committee appointed the year before to review efforts the convention already had been making on behalf of racial harmony, to study the racial situation and Southern Baptist responsibility, and to recommend procedures the SBC could use to meet those responsibilities. The special committee declared the convention's involvement in interracial efforts was not well known because the agencies did not include enough in their individual reports and the state papers had not reported much of the work that had been done. The committee pointed out some of the specific ministry that agencies had accomplished, including Home Mission Board work in cities, education offered through the jointly operated seminary and cooperative efforts of the white Baptist seminaries, and campus support through Baptist Student Unions on Black Baptist college campuses. It also noted the work of Woman's Missionary Union, the age-graded mission program for women and girls, in several states. In addition to assisting the National Baptist Convention women's missionary program, WMU provided summer camps for Black children.

The report took a bit of a paternalistic tone: “[S]urely the initiative and leadership in the solution of these problems belongs to those who have the greater advantage.” However, committee members also insisted the solution to race problems depended upon individual response—“a strong inward grip of religious faith and the inward demand of moral understanding and conviction.” Appealing to the fellowship of believers and to

³⁷⁰ Ibid., 145.

democratic principles, the committee recommended that the SBC and members recognize their responsibility and that the convention approve cooperative work and services. It also recommended increased communications about race, calling on the Baptist Sunday School Board to deal with race in its literature. In particular, it called upon the state Baptist editors to write editorials and publish contributed articles about race. It also called for greater coverage of the work Southern Baptists already were doing.³⁷¹ The editors responded individually to the committee's recommendations, rather than as a corporate body.

The U.S. Supreme Court ruling in 1954 in *Brown v. Board of Education* to end school segregation increased racial tension among Southern Baptists. Georgia Christian Index Editor John J. Hurt opined ten days after the high court ruling that residents of Georgia and other states were "not ready for non-segregation" and that the law should not outpace public opinion. When it does, "there always is trouble." He tried to mollify those who continued to support segregation, while suggesting gradual desegregation. He called on the church to be a voice, but he did not say explicitly what the church should verbalize.³⁷² Later, Hurt reported state paper editors' responses to the Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting in June. In his round-up article, Hurt emphasized the editors' opposition to expanding the Home Mission Board's role into Canada but devoted only two paragraphs of the two-column story to editors' response to an SBC Christian Life

³⁷¹ Race Relations Committee, Southern Baptist Convention, "Southern Baptists and Race Relations," *The Quarterly Review: A Survey of Southern Baptist Progress* 7, no. 4 (1947), 41-45. *The Quarterly Review* was a publication of the Baptist Sunday School Board. At least one committee finally took advantage of the 1947 directive for more press coverage. In 1963, the Advisory Council of Southern Baptists for Work with Negroes, consisting of representatives from SBC agencies, invited the SBPA to send two members to participate. The SBPA agreed to do so, "with one opposing vote (Southern Baptist Press Association Records, SBPA – Minutes 1963 (Box 1, file 1.58)).

³⁷² John J. Hurt, "Time For Prayer," *The Christian Index*, May 27, 1954.

Commission resolution. The SBC adopted the resolution and affirmed the Supreme Court decision was “in harmony with the constitutional guarantee of equal freedom to all citizens.”³⁷³ Hurt noted that *The Baptist Record of Mississippi* had criticized the resolution on the basis of the separation of church and state ideal, arguing that discussion of desegregation “had no place” at the annual meeting because the issue “is a political matter; not a church matter.”³⁷⁴

Editors had to approach coverage of race with caution in part because a number of powerful Southern Baptist leaders opposed integration, despite the convention’s statements. Influential Southern Baptist leader W.A. Criswell, pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas, in 1954, denounced the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling at the South Carolina Baptist Convention’s evangelism conference in 1956. Criswell’s stand prompted South Carolina Governor George Timmerman to invite the pastor to address the state legislature. Criswell blasted the Civil Rights Movement, the U.S. Supreme Court, and supporters of the integration cause.³⁷⁵ The well-known pastor moderated his position when elected as Southern Baptist Convention president in June 1968. Criswell endorsed the SBC resolution on race that year, adding that First Baptist Church would not turn anyone away and that it had three Black members. In 1956, Criswell called segregation “natural.” At a press conference following his election in 1968, he said he did

³⁷³ “Ruling On Segregation Endorsed,” *The Christian Index*, June 10, 1954.

³⁷⁴ “Editors Oppose Work In Canada,” *The Christian Index*, July 8, 1954.

³⁷⁵ Andrew M. Manis, “‘Dying From the Neck Up’: Southern Baptist Resistance to the Civil Rights Movement,” *Baptist History And Heritage* 34, no. 1:33.

not have time to compare his 1956 statements to his current feelings, but that he had “increased my sympathy for colored people.”³⁷⁶

Some southern states, including Georgia, considered legislation and possible changes to their constitutions to allow citizens to set up private schools that could remain segregated. The amendment in Georgia would have allowed state funding for private schools. Hurt objected, not for biblical or denominational reasons, but on the grounds that such a change would have given the Georgia General Assembly “dangerous authority.” It also would have broken “the wall separating Church and State.”³⁷⁷ The Georgia Baptist Convention adopted a report from its Social Service Commission, the state version of the national Christian Life Commission, in November 1954. The report supported the concept that every person is valuable to God and is “included in the plan of God.” However, Georgia Baptists stopped short of either approving or disapproving the Supreme Court ruling itself.³⁷⁸ Hurt did not offer an editorial opinion of the state body’s action. However, he did report that other state conventions in the South also called for a calm response to desegregation.³⁷⁹ Hurt encouraged “calm and deliberate thinking” the following year when the Supreme Court ruled public schools should be desegregated with speed. He called on his readers to give up defiance “for the sake of democracy.”³⁸⁰

³⁷⁶ Dallas Lee and Jim Newton, “Outspoken W.A. Criswell Elected SBC President,” Baptist Press news packet, June 5, 1968, and Roy Jennings, “SBC Blends Strong Race Stand With Conservatism,” Baptist Press news packet, June 7, 1968.

³⁷⁷ John J. Hurt, “Keep Public Schools,” *The Christian Index*, September 8, 1954.

³⁷⁸ “Justice, Calmness Keynote Plea of Commission On Racial Issues,” *The Christian Index*, November 25, 1954.

³⁷⁹ “Baptist Groups Hear Pleas For Calmness In Segregation Crisis,” *The Christian Index*, December 2, 1954.

³⁸⁰ John J. Hurt, “Sanity Demands Caution,” *The Christian Index*, June 9, 1955.

Hurt reinforced his call for law and order again in 1956. “Democracy survives only so long as law and order survive,” he wrote, adding that both segregationists and integrationists have rights. “But, all rights are lost when the law of the mob takes command.”³⁸¹ He issued the same warning following the school standoff in Little Rock, condemning mob violence and calling on the Georgia legislature to exercise leadership. He editorially praised then-U.S. Rep. Brooks Hayes of Arkansas who tried to act as a mediator between the Arkansas governor and President Eisenhower over Little Rock in 1958 and who lost his bid for reelection because of his efforts.³⁸² The Georgia editor stood for conversation between the races in 1959, supporting a request that had been made at the SBC annual meeting in May that year for the Executive Committee to arrange a conference with leaders of the Black Baptist conventions. In the wake of accusations that the editor was pushing integration, Hurt responded, “Has it gotten to the point where we are so afraid of our position in the Deep South that we refuse to sit around the conference table with Negro leaders? Are we more afraid of Negro Baptist leaders than we are of Khrushchev, with whom President Eisenhower confers this week?”³⁸³

Race relations issues brought out readers’ understanding of the role of state papers in 1959. The Arkansas Baptist carried several letters to the editor in response to an editorial about the necessity of public schools to maintain democracy. One reader

³⁸¹ John J. Hurt, “Democracy’s Death,” *The Christian Index*, September 13, 1956.

³⁸² John J. Hurt, “Triumph In Defeat,” *The Christian Index*, November 27, 1958. Hayes also served as Southern Baptist Convention president that year. Although he did not discuss that service during his political campaign, photos of him with Black Baptists stirred some controversy.

³⁸³ John J. Hurt, “Afraid Of Our Fears,” *The Christian Index*, September 17, 1959.

accused the paper of “advocating a compromise with a decree ordered by Satan himself.” Another expressed surprise that the paper “would stoop to the sort of journalism” that would support school integration. One reader felt the editor should print only Baptist news, rather than “personal feelings.” Even journalists were divided over the editorial. “Your Christian statesmanship in handling public issues through the Arkansas Baptist is one of the finest demonstrations of Christian journalism among us,” W. Barry Garrett wrote. However, the editor of the Arkansas Central Leader in McCrory, Arkansas, and obviously a Southern Baptist, declared, “The editorial does not voice the opinion of Arkansas Baptists as a whole, but people of other denominations think it does.”³⁸⁴

Hurt outlined his stand on race relations at the Southern Baptist Press Association’s 1962 annual meeting, forthrightly standing for desegregation. He preferred to use the word “desegregation” because he believed it was “a less offensive word in the Deep South than integration.” He told fellow editors he approached desegregation as the law of the land and as vital to Southern Baptist mission efforts. “Baptist state papers cannot afford to ignore the racial issue. Their editorial pages must give guidance toward a Christian solution” because the papers are denominational leaders, he insisted. Hurt described the steps the Index had taken to support desegregation of Georgia public schools. The paper objected to the report of the state Baptist convention’s Social Service Commission in 1960³⁸⁵ because Hurt believed it did not speak up strongly enough in support of public schools.

³⁸⁴ Race Relations and Southern Baptists Collection, 1959 – Clippings, Notes, Press Releases (Box 2, file 2.8).

³⁸⁵ John J. Hurt, “Must Convention Avoid The Issue?” *The Christian Index*, August 11, 1960.

At the 1962 SBPA meeting, Hurt told the editors about threats he received over his call for racial harmony. The threats did not bother him as much as pastors' attitudes. "More disturbing is the number of Baptist preachers who want to silence an editor with whom they disagree." Regardless of detractors, Hurt believed the state paper "gained more than it lost. People respect a paper which will speak its convictions more than one too cowardly to have a voice." Even though he was proud of the stand he and the paper had taken, he realized that in a hundred years, people would "see how little we did."³⁸⁶ Often, SBPA presenters distributed printed copies of their presentations and would allow editors to publish them. However, Hurt marked his paper as not for publication, and the minutes do not reflect his reasons for the refusal. Likely he was still receiving backlash in Georgia for his stand that "[d]esegregation is Christian and ... segregation is NOT Christian."³⁸⁷ Perhaps he felt he would receive additional harassment or that editors who published his work would be chastised as well.

Home Mission Board editorial director Walker L. Knight is credited with using his journalism skills to push Southern Baptists, including state paper and agency editors, to greater inclusion. After working as associate editor at the Texas Baptist Standard for ten years, Knight joined the SBC Home Mission Board as director of the editorial department in 1959, with primary responsibility for the agency's Home Mission Magazine. He decided to "set the tone of [his] editorship" in 1960 by publishing the report of a study by the Advisory Council on Southern Baptist Work with Negroes.

³⁸⁶ John J. Hurt, "Race Relations," Presentation to the Southern Baptist Press Association, February 1962, SBPA – Papers Presented, 1962-1964, Southern Baptist Press Association Records (Box 1, file 1.58).

³⁸⁷ He also faced criticism at the church where he was a member. He told the editors: "[M]y campaign to change the policy in my own church has reduced my own popularity to where I could not be elected to so much as treasurer of the deacon's flower fund...."

Formed in 1954, the council included a representative from each SBC agency and institution that worked with Blacks. The study showed that the SBC was conducting a great deal of work but that most of it separated whites and Blacks and was paternalistic in attitude.³⁸⁸

In 1960, Knight decided to extensively cover work with Blacks, something no agency journal or state paper had done. He viewed his journalistic approach differently at the Home Mission Board than he had done at the Baptist Standard, becoming more issue-oriented than doing “strict objective journalism.” He believed he could deal more directly with issues at the agency and decided to confront readers. “I saw Southern Baptists sinning—there’s hardly any other word for it—on race and other matters.”³⁸⁹ Some supervisors, concerned about his approach, “suggested that I let up on the reporting.” Although hired to edit the magazine, he acted as associate to the editor until the editor retired. When Knight put a photo of an African American in the magazine, the editor took him to HMB Executive Director Courts Redford. Knight was told that he would not be allowed to advocate for Blacks editorially or otherwise. “I was shocked.... I determined right then that I would be the editor and they would have to fire me.” He felt they would not because they did not want the embarrassment. “I was going to function as the editor.... [even though] they had the understanding that they could tell me what could be published and how it would be presented.” He often was called into the executive director’s office and asked to explain what a particular article had to do with missions.

³⁸⁸ Walker L. Knight, “Race Relations: Changing Patterns and Practices” in *Southern Baptists Observed: Multiple Perspectives on a Changing Denomination*, ed. Nancy Tatom Ammerman (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1993), 166.

³⁸⁹ Walker L. Knight, personal interview, Atlanta, Georgia, October 15, 2018.

Frustrated with the administrator's lack of understanding, Knight repeatedly defended his position by reminding the director, "That's the context in which missions takes place."³⁹⁰

He almost lost his position when he suggested individual churches could implement a plan for more racial inclusion ahead of its formal release. In 1962, the SBC Christian Life Committee asked the convention's calendar committee to include Race Relations Sunday. Because of the planning required, the emphasis would not appear on the national calendar until 1965. Knight decided to include suggestions in the magazine for an observance in 1963. Among his suggestions was that churches able to do so should announce they were open to everyone. The executive director reprimanded him, adding Knight would have "to go somewhere else" to continue the editorial freedom he had enjoyed. Knight decided he would still cover race at the Home Mission Board, again believing he would not be fired. Redford retired the following year. New director Arthur Rutledge advocated racial equality, making Knight's desire to advocate for Blacks easier.³⁹¹

Most Southern Baptist journalists bowed to denominational pressure, though, in September 1963. The administrative subcommittee of the SBC Executive Committee failed to respond to a request for the Executive Committee to speak out strongly on the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, that had happened three days earlier. Instead, subcommittee members only passed a general resolution about racial violence, at the insistence of trustees from Alabama who did not want the state specifically mentioned. All the action took place in closed session. Not

³⁹⁰ Ibid.

³⁹¹ Knight (1993), 172.

only did the subcommittee fail to address the situation, they forbade the editors present from reporting the deliberation that took place. All but two editors complied with the directive. The Christian Index Editor John J. Hurt editorialized about the closure and left a blank spot on the editorial page to reflect what the subcommittee permitted to be reported.³⁹²

The passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 pushed the Southern Baptist Convention to continue to deal with its response to race, and to continue to unite around federal law. Not everyone wanted the convention to accept integration, regardless of the law. The SBC met ahead of Congress' vote on the act and the SBC Christian Life Commission through its director, Foy Valentine, attempted to get the convention to issue a strong statement on race. However, a weaker substitute resolution was presented and passed. In two editorials in *The Alabama Baptist*, Editor Leon Macon, a self-proclaimed segregationist, noted his role with a group, composed primarily of Baptist pastors and leaders from Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana, that developed the alternative resolution. He emphasized the meeting of "the brethren" who drew up the substitute resolution was "not closed" to the messengers. Instead, "there was no time to make it public." He lamented that Southern Baptists were misunderstood and called "racists and

³⁹² John J. Hurt, "Too Much Power Invested In Too Few Baptists," *The Christian Index*, September 26, 1963. Thirty years later, Bynum Shaw, in his book, *Divided We Stand: The Baptists in American Life*, revealed the information about the closed session. SBC leaders learned about the coverup through a Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America statement in 1993 urging the SBC to acknowledge the mistake. The Christian Life Commission released a story about the subcommittee and the resolution switch through Baptist Press. (Louis Moore, "Baptists say cover-up wrong, urge fight against racism," Baptist Press news packet, July 1, 1993, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, <http://media.sbhla.org.s3.amazonaws.com/7591,01-Jul-1993.pdf>.)

narrow-minded” for taking the position that God’s purpose in the world was salvation, not social justice.³⁹³

The Southern Baptist Press Association did not discuss the Leon Macon meeting or those involved. However, in a June 11, 1964, round-up story of editors’ opinions about the SBC annual meeting, Hurt included remarks from two editors who disapproved of the separate meeting. North Carolina Baptist Biblical Recorder Editor Marse Grant called the meeting a “rump session” and charged that “this hard-core group will continue to oppose every convention statement on race. Hurt also quoted Maryland Baptist Editor Gainer E. Bryan, Jr., who had attended the meeting and charged the group threatened to dissolve the Christian Life Commission because it proposed the stronger resolution. Chauncey R. Daley, editor of the Kentucky Baptist Western Recorder, admitted that the national body was conservative “with a reluctance to speak out on social issues.”³⁹⁴ He apparently agreed with that stand. The SBPA as a body focused primarily on limiting federal funding to private and parochial schools as the answer to pushing integration of public schools. Members did issue a resolution on race at their 1965 annual meeting, urging every Southern Baptist “to take immediate steps” to help everyone get full rights.³⁹⁵ However, the following year, they passed a resolution to honor Macon, the ardent segregationist, on his death in 1965. They recognized “his warm friendship, his broad

³⁹³ Leon Macon, “The Spirit of Disagreement” and “The Frictions’ Cause,” *The Alabama Baptist*, June 11, 1964.

³⁹⁴ John J. Hurt, “Atlantic City In Retrospect: Editors Critical of Southern Baptist Convention,” *The Christian Index*, June 11, 1964.

³⁹⁵ SBPA Minutes, 1965, Southern Baptist Press Association Records (Box 1, file 1.58).

scholarship, his editorial ability, his firm convictions, his unswerving courage, his deep spirituality, his complete denominational loyalty and his abiding faith....”³⁹⁶

Race issues rarely show up in the available SBPA records after 1965. Some directives were given and requests made through the late 1960s and early 1970s, including a Christian Life Commission request for state papers to handle most of the promotion of Race Relations Sunday in 1973. The SBC Executive Committee sought leaders, including editors, willing to sign a Statement Concerning the Crisis in Our Nation in 1968. The document called for the Executive Committee and the SBC to approve the statement, authorized specific agencies to form a taskforce, and called on all entities, including the churches, to “join ... in a renewal of Christian effort to meet this national crisis.”³⁹⁷ Yet, a fiasco at the Baptist Sunday School Board over the cover and a story in a church training quarterly for teens and adult leader material in 1971 emphasized the race issue still created controversy and divided Southern Baptists. BSSB administrators destroyed the already printed version (140,000 student quarterlies and 18,000 leader quarterlies) because a photo of an African-American boy and two white girls engaged in conversation and some of the text might be misinterpreted and “could have been construed as improper promotion ... of integration in churches.”³⁹⁸ Christian Index Editor Jack U. Harwell included the Baptist Press story in his November 11, 1971, issue.

³⁹⁶ SBPA Minutes – 1966-1969, Southern Baptist Press Association Records (Box 2, file 2.1).

³⁹⁷ H. Franklin Paschall and Porter Routh, letter to heads of SBC agencies, state secretaries, and state editors, May 13, 1968, and “A Statement Concerning the Crisis in Our Nation.” Race Relations and Southern Baptists Collection, 1968 – Clippings, Notes, Press Releases (Box 1, file 1.45).

³⁹⁸ “Sullivan Directs Revision Of Quarterly After Printing,” Baptist Press news packet, October 28, 1971.

Although some national mainstream media, such as The New York Times, had started covering the Civil Rights Movement earlier, the attempt to integrate schools in Little Rock in 1957 was a major turning point in reporting.³⁹⁹ Southern Baptist journalists moved much more slowly, primarily beginning with the 1947 SBC special committee report and recommendation for the papers to cover national and state convention services for Blacks. The Southern Baptist editors, as a group, took years to follow the committee's recommendations. Although editors increased coverage of African Americans, most stories focused on theological education, agency-initiated activities such as children's camps, and periodic reports from the national and individual state departments or agencies tasked with work among Blacks. The news service and the state Baptist editors rarely covered civil rights events, even in the South.

The Civil Rights Movement contributed to Southern Baptist journalists' professionalism through the period because it forced individual editors to examine their beliefs first and then to face whether they would publish their opinions. They had to decide whether they would please readers or denominational leaders. In 1970, SBPA asked Baptist Press to produce a national roundup article about how churches were dealing with school busing and one on the numbers of Baptist churches opening private schools as a means to avoid integration. They asked for stories on steps Southern Baptists were taking to promote opening available housing for minorities. They also passed a resolution in support of free public education for all children.

³⁹⁹ Roberts and Klibanoff, Kindle location 3370. "It would be in Little Rock that news organizations would change, in just about every respect, the way they covered what would become known as the civil rights movement."

Baptist Press Director Wilmer C. Fields emphasized the news service's commitment to sound journalism in the midst of racial turmoil in a response to Owen Cooper, a Southern Baptist layman and businessman in Mississippi and a member of the SBC Executive Committee. Cooper criticized Baptist Press coverage of the shooting of civil rights activist James Meredith in June 1966. The Mississippian took issue with the story's tone, believing mainstream and Baptist media were treating Mississippians unfairly. In a September 2, 1966 letter, Fields thanked Cooper for the leadership Mississippi Southern Baptists had shown in the "highly volatile" situation in that state. Then he explained that Baptist Press journalists tried to write "in such clear and explicit style that the reader cannot misunderstand." He pointed to the writer, noting: "Dallas Lee ... is much too skillful a newsman to imply incorrectly that all or even most of the racial unrest mentioned ... was caused by this one single unfortunate event..." Fields also pointed out the story was factual, and invited Cooper to present his concerns to the SBPA or to the SBC Public Relations Advisory Committee.⁴⁰⁰

An exchange in August 1966 among news service journalists over the clergy's role in controlling race riots shows the conflict editors had between a desire to be professional and the pressure to protect the denomination. W. Barry Garrett, then-associate director of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs and the Baptist Press Washington, D.C., bureau chief, contacted BP Assistant Director Jim Newton about "a honey of a story" in the Congressional Record about clergy activities in civil rights. Rep. Jonathan B. Bingham, a New York Democrat, defended the clergy and urged them to

⁴⁰⁰ Wilmer C. Fields letter to Owen Cooper, September 2, 1966. Race Relations and Southern Baptists Collection, 1966 – Clippings, Notes, Press Releases (Box 1, file 1.42).

continue to participate. Garrett admitted he struggled to find a Baptist angle to make the story fit Baptist Press but pitched it anyway.⁴⁰¹ With Fields attending a conference, Newton responded that his boss likely would not publish a story that “would merely duplicate” an article other news services, including Religion News Service, already had published, “unless we can give our Baptist readership audience something extra.... Sounds like it might make a good story, if we can scoop everyone on it.”⁴⁰²

Garrett determined he could tie the story to Southern ministers who had participated in the movement in any capacity, and then had suffered consequences. “Although Baptist ministers in the South did not join in the Selma march, etc., many have taken firm stands on racial justice, fair housing, equal rights, fellowship in the church, etc.,” he said. Many had been forced to resign or had been “persecuted.” He asked for names of pastors or Baptist employees that might have been in Baptist Press’ files. Garrett indicated Baptist Press should decide whether or not to use the completed story, “or you may want to alter it some to safeguard BP.”⁴⁰³ Later, Garrett sent the completed story to Newton and included it in the Baptist Press news packet sent to religious and commercial media outlets. However, Garrett only referred to Southern Baptist pastors in general terms, noting that a few “have actively participated” and “many have acted quietly behind the scenes.” He added that some had received “sharp pressures” and a

⁴⁰¹ W. Barry Garrett Telex message to Jim Newton, August 18, 1966. Race Relations and Southern Baptists Collection, 1966 – Clippings, Notes, Press Releases (Box 1, file 1.42).

⁴⁰² Jim Newton Telex message to W. Barry Garret, August 18, 1966. Race Relations and Southern Baptists Collection, 1966 – Clippings, Notes, Press Releases (Box 1, file 1.42).

⁴⁰³ W. Barry Garrett second Telex message to Jim Newton, August 18, 1966. Race Relations and Southern Baptists Collection, 1966 – Clippings, Notes, Press Releases (Box 1, file 1.42).

“few have been forced to resign and seek other employment.”⁴⁰⁴ In a follow-up message to Newton the next day, Garrett provided a few specific names that could have been added to the story.⁴⁰⁵ However, Fields chose not to do so, insisting that several pastors on the list “were also incompetents and the ‘race’ angle was an excuse—or just the straw that broke the camel’s back.”⁴⁰⁶

Although a number of editors, including Fields, Knight, and Hurt, bucked criticism from laypersons, pastors, and some agency supervisors and trustees, for the most part, at least publicly, they were backed by the SBC executive secretary, most of the SBC presidents, and a majority of the Executive Committee. While the Civil Rights Movement tangentially affected the reporting, it forced many journalists to question their personal views and their theology about civil and human rights. They were challenged to change attitudes about their reporting and about their faith. A few, such as Leon Macon of the Alabama Baptist, did neither. However, the movement helped Southern Baptist journalists to see a broader, national picture. As the news service began and grew in the 1940s and 1950s, state papers could contribute to the national discussion as their stories were picked up and distributed more frequently.

Strong Push for Professionalization

After his election as secretary of public relations for the Southern Baptist Convention and director of Baptist Press in 1959, Wilmer C. Fields began pushing for

⁴⁰⁴ W. Barry Garrett, “Solon Says Clergy Help Curb Riots, Extremism,” Baptist Press news packet, August 19, 1966.

⁴⁰⁵ W. Barry Garrett Telex message to Jim Newton, August 19, 1966. Race Relations and Southern Baptists Collection, 1966 – Clippings, Notes, Press Releases (Box 1, file 1.42).

⁴⁰⁶ Wilmer C. Fields, undated note attached to the August 19, 1966 Telex files. Race Relations and Southern Baptist Collection, 1966 – Clippings, Notes, Press Releases (Box 1, file 1.42).

greater professionalization. He already had begun participating in the Southern Baptist Press Association as editor of the Mississippi Baptist Record from 1956 to 1959. He was a member of the Religious Public Relations Council and Associated Church Press, leading the SBPA and many of its member state papers to join as well.⁴⁰⁷ He participated in an SBPA meeting held in Washington, D.C. in 1957 at which each editor could arrange to meet with legislators from his state.⁴⁰⁸ He saw the value of networking and planned several opportunities for state editors to connect with mainstream and religious journalists. He instigated journalism workshops at least as early as the mid-1950s.⁴⁰⁹ Each summer after taking the SBC post, he invited agency public relations staffers and state paper editors and associate editors to New York and Washington, where he arranged visits with editors and writers at Newsweek, the Associated Press, Time magazine and the Washington Post. Often, he arranged for speakers from other mainstream news organizations, including the Chicago Tribune, Los Angeles Times, and the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, to address summer workshops. “Baptist Press opened those doors. If it had been just a propaganda organization, we wouldn’t have been able to get out of the cab in New York,” noted Floyd Craig, who served on the SBC Christian Life Commission communication staff from 1967 to 1979.⁴¹⁰

⁴⁰⁷ Associated Church Press, 1958 – Proposal, Fields Papers (Box 2, file 2.69).

⁴⁰⁸ Southern Baptist Press Association, 1957, Fields Papers (Box 82, file 82.9).

⁴⁰⁹ Journalism Workshop, Fields Papers (Box 54, file 54.57 and file 54.58).

⁴¹⁰ Floyd Craig, phone interview, September 19, 2018, and Norman Jameson, “A remembrance of things past,” Baptist News Global, February 20, 2015, republished December 7, 2018, in honor of W.C. Fields’ death on December 2, 2018. Accessed at baptistnews.com/article/a-remembrance-of-things-past/#.XJw_a-tKjVo.

Craig believes Fields' integrity and commitment to relationship-building helped SBC pastors and church members begin to see race relations from a different perspective. Those attributes also made strong connections with other news organizations, allowing communicators such as Craig to pass story ideas to major newspapers and news magazines. "We attempted to be honest.... We didn't use the relationships to benefit the institution or the agencies."⁴¹¹ Norman Jameson, Baptist Press feature editor from 1977 to 1982, agreed that honesty often helped bridge the gap between Black and white Baptists during the Civil Rights Movement and developed relationships with mainstream media. "W.C.'s perspective ... was to be straightforward and as unbiased as possible."⁴¹²

Throughout the Civil Rights Movement, friction built between fundamental-conservatives, who wanted to maintain a literal view of the church's role in society, and moderate-conservatives, who believed the church should remain part of society and engage with it. That friction began to take a toll on Southern Baptist journalists and to erode their independence and professionalism.

⁴¹¹ Floyd Craig, phone interview, September 19, 2018.

⁴¹² Norman Jameson, phone interview, August 22, 2018.

CHAPTER 5

Journalism Full Circle

The Southern Baptist press began as independent religious papers that affiliated with Baptist state conventions in the mid- to late-nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. The formation of the Southern Baptist Press Association gave them opportunities to share information and to provide training in newswork practices. A sense of independence developed in the 1940s and 1950s and throughout the Civil Rights Movement as editors and journalists often, though cautiously, chose to voice support for racial acceptance and change. However, whether called a fundamentalist takeover or conservative resurgence, the Southern Baptist Convention's further shift to the theological and political right in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s returned its press to serving largely as denominational public relations, rather than as an autonomous voice.

Before 1979, Southern Baptists shared an evangelical culture steeped in the traditions of the South, no matter where across the country they lived—a denomination “intricately related to a particular culture.”⁴¹³ However, the denomination allowed for theological diversity and some difference in practice. Southern Baptists adhered to “the Grand Compromise,” which required each subgroup to give in on some points so that the convention's theology could include a fairly broad base of conservative followers. The denomination would allow diversity so that its focus remained on missions and evangelism. The Grand Compromise included the Baptist Faith and Message, a statement

⁴¹³ Leonard (1990), xi.

of beliefs formulated in 1925, that outlined basic tenets. The statement was adopted, even though some members opposed it as too creedal. Leaders decided the statement was ambiguous enough to include nearly everyone, and fundamentalists were satisfied that the SBC had stated its doctrinal positions.⁴¹⁴

Fundamentalism developed as a means to counteract modernism that some conservatives saw as undermining biblical truth, especially as it related to growing belief in evolution. Because its identification with southern culture developed as the convention formed its denominational identity, the SBC struggled as southern identity began to change in the 1970s and 1980s. Rosenberg contends the SBC remained connected to the South through the 1980s, that both shared a common cultural understanding as “hyper-American: hyper-rural ... hyper-patriotic ... hyper- also in indifference to history and anti-intellectualism ... hyper-racist and -sexist.”⁴¹⁵ Morgan sees fundamentalism as “more than a set of theological beliefs; it is an attitude—a frame of mind. In most cases it is an inflexible frame of mind.”⁴¹⁶ That attitude toward southern culture developed because Southern Baptists identified with it and “feel comfortable in their role of supporting and perpetuating its norms and mores.”⁴¹⁷

⁴¹⁴ David T. Morgan, *The New Crusades, the New Holy Land: Conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention, 1969-1991* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1996), 6.

⁴¹⁵ Ellen M. Rosenberg, *The Southern Baptists: A Subculture in Transition* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1989), 5. Rosenberg attributes the split among Southern Baptist primarily as an issue of social class.

⁴¹⁶ Morgan, 5.

⁴¹⁷ Barry Hankins, *Uneasy in Babylon: Southern Baptist Conservatives and American Culture* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002), 2. Hankins sees the SBC’s stronger shift to the theological and political right as a means for fundamental-conservatives to fight the broader “culture war” in American society.

Fundamentalists exploited the changes to southern and Southern Baptist cultures. “[O]ne of the powerful appeals of fundamentalism has been its promise to protect the convention from the upheavals of modernity and cultural transition.” Southern Baptist fundamentalists connected their cause to the southern effort to reclaim some of the region’s distinctiveness in the 1980s and 1990s. According to Leonard, as more members accepted fundamentalism’s promise, “the old Southern Baptist coalition [was] powerless to respond to a fundamentalist takeover of the denomination itself.”⁴¹⁸ Though Leonard sees the conservative shift as exploitation, Hankins considers it protection of the premises upon which the convention had been built. Fundamental-conservative leaders were “convinced that American culture has turned hostile to traditional forms of faith” and that the South was no longer immune to diversity, pluralism, and secularism,” so “they began to mobilize.” First, they had to move within the SBC to “take control of their denomination.”⁴¹⁹ The Grand Compromise no longer created unity as a growing number of leaders and members refused to compromise, claiming that to do so would jeopardize theological integrity. They began to pit the ideal of the ability of each person to approach God individually against biblical authority. As moderates accepted greater diversity, fundamentalists more emphatically insisted that Southern Baptists should conform to the fundamental-conservative literalist view,⁴²⁰ because to do so would protect the convention from drifting to the theological left.⁴²¹

⁴¹⁸ Leonard, 16-17.

⁴¹⁹ Hankins, 2.

⁴²⁰ Rosenberg, x.

⁴²¹ Hankins, 4.

Even though small groups of fundamentalists developed earlier within the Southern Baptist Convention, they did not have enough clout to control the denomination's administration until the late 1970s. Before 1979, members were bound by the strong unity of the southern culture itself. As the culture shifted to take on more of the characteristics of the broader nation, Southern Baptists lost part of the culture as well. Because the convention's identity was so closely tied to southern culture, it retained its religious and cultural power. The southern cultural shift began to erode the convention's power by the end of the 1970s. In addition, SBC leaders hesitated to appear too creedal. They considered themselves as "people of the Book," relying on their interpretation of the Bible for standards of belief and practice, which reenforced a "pietistic concern for heart religion" or the concept that society could change only when individuals' attitudes changed. They were committed to evangelism and missions, a commitment they believed would overcome any disagreement. They also had "an almost obsessive concern to avoid schism at all costs."⁴²²

Because of its ties to the South, the corporate body was denominationally and culturally homogeneous. That homogeneity helped the SBC overcome the "divisive effects of the fundamentalist-modernist controversies of the 1920s." Even though both sides argued over modernism, orthodoxy, evolution, and the social gospel, disagreement did not lead to dissolution. A few diehard fundamentalists, such as J. Frank Norris of Fort Worth, Texas, resisted evolution, pushing hard enough to force eight faculty members at Baylor University to resign.⁴²³ However, the denomination's numerical growth through

⁴²² Leonard, 134.

⁴²³ Ammerman (1990), 48-49.

the late 1940s and the 1950s resulted in a stronger connection to the broader society. Leaders began to see a need to “maintain...the truth of the Bible” as “spiritual survival.”⁴²⁴ That attitude led to a greater desire to stop ideas that might challenge the denomination’s understanding of truth. Controversy over Dr. Ralph Elliott’s commentary on Genesis led the SBC to pass two resolutions on the infallibility of the Bible and its historical accuracy during its 1962 annual meeting. Messengers (delegates) also appointed a committee to rewrite the denomination’s statement of faith. Trustees of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, where Elliott taught, fired him because he refused to withdraw his book from publication. The rewritten faith statement created controversy because of various interpretations of the phrase that described the Bible as “having truth without any mixture of error for its matter,” even though the phrase also had appeared in the 1925 version.⁴²⁵ The 1963 version of the Baptist Faith and Message kept peace within the denomination for about five years. Then fundamental-conservatives used it to begin purging those they considered as moderates or liberals from the Southern Baptist Convention.⁴²⁶

Genesis became the focus of controversy again in 1970 when the SBC publishing arm, Broadman Press, published the new Broadman Commentary volume on Genesis by British scholar G. Henton Davies, who took a nonliteral view. Messengers (delegates) to the SBC annual meeting agreed with fundamental-conservatives to force the book to be withdrawn and rewritten from a conservative point of view. The Baptist Sunday School

⁴²⁴ Ibid., 63.

⁴²⁵ Ibid., 63-64.

⁴²⁶ Morgan, 9.

Board argued from the Grand Compromise position that “there was room in the SBC for a diversity of opinion about the Bible.” Messengers refused to rewrite the following year, and the BSSB had to have the volume rewritten a second time.⁴²⁷

While most Southern Baptist fundamental-conservatives and moderate-conservatives held to basic Protestant Christian tenets, the crisis between the two groups stemmed from differences in practice and details of particular events, including “the proper forms of worship, the place of women, ministries of peace and justice, the nature of Scripture, the details of the Second Coming of Christ, and a host of other points.”⁴²⁸

The role of women in the church especially became a point of contention, holding nearly as much concern for fundamental-conservatives as race had done. Some moderate-conservatives, who led the denomination through the late 1960s and the 1970s, had begun to see women’s roles as culturally determined and decided to accept and promote women in leadership positions, including as pastor. A handful of SBC-affiliated agencies and institutions—the Student Ministries Department, Southern Baptist and Southwestern Baptist seminaries, and Woman’s Missionary Union—accepted the shift in the early 1980s.⁴²⁹ When fundamental-conservatives realized women were gaining acceptance, they fought back, particularly after taking control of most of the institutions. Women as pastors became a symbol of the division within the Southern Baptist Convention.

⁴²⁷ Ammerman (1990), 67-68. Although fundamental-conservatives would have preferred that the original volume be destroyed, Baptist Sunday School Board leaders decided not to do so. Instead, they were able to sell it through a British publisher.

⁴²⁸ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁴²⁹ *Ibid.*, 92. Although Ammerman does not mention them, a number of Southern Baptist-related universities and colleges accepted the change, as well. Several institutions, including the two seminaries, opened their male-dominated options as early as the 1970s, allowing women to take preaching courses and permitting them to participate in preaching competitions.

Fundamental-conservatives pointed to changing women's roles as proof of moderate-conservatives "defying God's word," while moderate-conservatives used the issue as proof of fundamental-conservatives' "oppressiveness."⁴³⁰ U.S. politics also played into the Southern Baptist continued conservative shift. Fundamental-conservatives began moving from the Democratic to the Republican Party in the mid-1980s because they believed Republicans were more in sync with the fundamental-conservative definition of traditional values. They also agreed with the development of the Moral Majority, a right-wing political group, while moderate-conservatives did not. A small number of Southern Baptist fundamental-conservatives joined the religious and political far-right in rejecting the separation of church and state ideal.⁴³¹

Once fundamental-conservatives made up their collective minds to stop the spiritual and cultural drift of the convention and of U.S. society, they organized as meticulously within the convention as if they were running a candidate for U.S. Congress. They took advantage of the Southern Baptist Convention's governance

⁴³⁰ Ibid., 93. Flowers also contends that feminism played a substantial role in the ideological debates about inerrancy and cultural debates over race and gender. "[O]ne of the most divisive issues became women's roles and practices" (4). By the 1980s, fundamental-conservatives equated women's ordination with feminism, abortion, the Equal Rights Amendment, and "other liberal causes that the religious right portrayed as antifamily, anti-American, and anti-Christian" (5). Kell and Camp note that the SBC's "exclusive rhetorical system" stresses that women must be submissive. If not, they could be removed from membership. (Carl L. Kell and L. Raymond Camp, *In the Name of the Father: The Rhetoric of the New Southern Baptist Convention* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999), 2.)

⁴³¹ Ammerman, 99, 105. Hankins (161) contends that by the 1990s fundamental-conservatives and moderate-conservatives approached church and state political issues differently. Moderates saw any attempt to promote "even low levels of establishment of the majority faith" would "curtail the rights of minorities." Conservatives, however, believe "that a decadent culture was being stripped clean of religion with the help of a secularizing state hostile to faith." Moderates held that free exercise issues were among the least of cultural issues to consider, while conservatives believed they were the most important. Danny Collum, in "A Chilling Precedent," (Sojourners magazine, June 1985) explains the SBC fundamental-conservatives' ties to the New Right. (The Southern Baptist Convention Controversy Collection, 1980-1995. AR812, file 1.10, Chronological File – 1985.)

structure, planning carefully how to gain complete control over five years. First, they needed to get fundamental-conservative men elected as president. Adrian P. Rogers was the first, elected in 1979, with Bailey E. Smith in 1980 and 1981, James T. Draper in 1982 and 1983, and Charles F. Stanley in 1984 and 1985. Rogers was elected again in 1986 and 1987. Control of the presidency had to come first because the president, under the convention's bylaws, has the power to ensure likeminded individuals would eventually be elected to all other positions.⁴³² The process for the fundamental-conservatives took five years due to the trustee rotation system most committees and boards follow. Within five to six years, all moderate-conservative-leaning trustees had rotated off, and the president's influence through the Committee on Committees allowed only fundamental-conservatives to replace them. According to Junker, the state paper editors were caught unaware as the struggle for control developed between the two sides.⁴³³ He cites Lynn Clayton, then-editor of the Louisiana state paper, Baptist Message, who "felt that most editors were unprepared for what happened in Houston, or at least what it represented."⁴³⁴

As fundamental-conservatives pushed for narrower theological boundaries, editors divided over some issues. The 1962 controversy over Dr. Ralph Elliott's

⁴³² Under the bylaws, the president appoints the powerful Committee on Committees, naming two individuals from each qualified state or territory and designating a convention vice president as chair. The Committee on Committees nominates members to any special committees authorized during an annual meeting. However, its primary responsibility is to nominate all who serve on the Committee on Nominations. (Southern Baptist Convention 2018 Annual, 13, 18.) With that power, the Committee on Committees virtually ensures that those who serve on all SBC committees and boards will hold to the theological and political philosophy of the president.

⁴³³ Junker, 147.

⁴³⁴ Ibid. The SBC annual meeting was held in Houston, Texas in 1979.

commentary on Genesis was one of those. Ross Edwards, then editor of the Missouri Baptist Word & Way, stood on the fundamental-conservative side and chaired a meeting of a group of about fifty individuals who were “concerned about liberalism in the Convention.” Other editors were more centrist, decrying moves to destroy the book and encouraging members to allow the agencies to decide how to handle concerns. Editors also landed on both sides in the concern over separation of church and state issues, especially regarding financial assistance to private and parochial schools. Many were critical of Southern Baptist colleges and universities that wanted to accept government funding, while others supported the move.⁴³⁵

Junker believes state Baptist papers focused primarily on denominational promotion through the 1960s and 1970s, even as they professionalized the design of the papers and the approach to news. He cites Bobby Terry, editor of the Missouri Baptist Word & Way in the late 1970s and 1980s, who said most editors had made “little attempt to relate to the larger culture or secular issues.”⁴³⁶ However, not all state paper editors took that position. Several, including Hurt at The Christian Index until 1966 and Jack U. Harwell who succeeded Hurt, often editorialized about social and political issues, especially within their respective states. Both also pointed out national issues, especially when those issues touched on spiritual and behavioral aspects of living. Indeed, in its first

⁴³⁵ Ibid., 136-142. Most editors did editorialize about controversial issues within the SBC and often were divided over their positions.

⁴³⁶ Ibid., 136-137, quoting from Bobby S. Terry, “An Examination of Expectations Held for Word and Way by Selected Groups of Missouri Baptists” (D.Min. thesis, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1979). Terry based his conclusion on a survey he had conducted for his thesis. Also, Junker drew from Terry’s unpublished 1985 manuscript, “Word and Way (A Brief History of Missouri’s State Baptist Paper).” Interestingly, Terry’s contention that editors made little attempt to relate to larger issues apparently did not apply to him. He was well-known for his editorials at *Word & Way* and then later at the *Alabama Baptist* that spoke to political and societal issues.

documented resolution on freedom of the press in 1970, the Southern Baptist Press Association called on members to provide readers with “an incisive appraisal of issues and problems.”⁴³⁷ Junker based his conclusion on volume within the papers from 1962 to 1979, citing promotion of agencies and institutions, educational activities, and fundraising.⁴³⁸ Likely, Junker might have discovered a broader approach had he based his observation primarily on editorials. Most state papers made room for reports from boards and agencies in each issue. Several included outlines or commentary on the upcoming Sunday’s adult Bible lesson, usually written by a pastor or state Baptist worker. The state papers’ primary role was to promote Baptist work, but they still were able—and did—seek to apply basic Christian tenets to social problems.

An “Exclusive” Rhetorical System

The fundamental-conservatives developed an “exclusive” rhetorical system that allowed them to reshape the denomination in its communication, its “leadership autocracy,” and its stresses on women’s roles within the church. Their communication “projects a conformist, doctrinaire, and gender-explicit leadership model” that “requires” obedience. Leadership may act autocratically, punishing deviation from “conformist standards of denominational exclusivity.” The primary stress fundamental-conservatives place on women is to be submissive. If not, they can be removed from membership.⁴³⁹

By the end of the 1990s, SBC conservative leaders used three rhetorics. The rhetoric of fundamentalism included belief in Jesus as the only Son, a tightened and

⁴³⁷ SBPA Minutes, 1970, Southern Baptist Press Association Records (Box 2, file 2.2).

⁴³⁸ Junker, 137.

⁴³⁹ Kell and Camp, 2.

limited concept of the priesthood of the believer (an individual believer's ability to approach God), and the Bible as "Spirit-breathed," as it was originally given directly by God and writers who were inspired by the Holy Spirit (the third person of the Christian concept of a triune God). However, "denominational loyalists seem to have supercharged such rhetoric with a harsh Leviticus-like edge, seeming to disallow individual believers with diversity of conscience." The rhetoric of inerrancy pushed the concept that the Bible is absolutely true, inerrant, and pure in all matters of faith, history, culture, and science. Fundamental-conservatives also promoted a rhetoric of exclusion through the "use of attack, exposition, and expulsion; fear and comfort, and abominational language, which has typically focused on the themes of blame and accusation."⁴⁴⁰ The power imbued to the pulpit is one reason the fundamental-conservative effort was successful. Both sides in the fundamental-conservative/moderate-conservative controversy would hold that "the pulpit in Baptist life has power and influence over individuals [and] churches...."⁴⁴¹ Kell and Camp see the SBC as a closed communication system, characterized by a closed atmosphere, no dissenting voices at annual meetings, and use of the pulpit as a power to "diminish rifts."⁴⁴² The convention's closed communication system relies on the promotion of inerrancy and exclusion those who disagree and on the pulpit as a "tool of power." Kell and Camp believe Southern Baptists "have recognized the pulpit and the

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid., 3. Leviticus deals with Old Testament law.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid., 6. However, Kell and Camp assert that the pulpit also has power over the culture at large. Even by the late 1990s, when their book was published, the power of most preachers' words had waned considerably. Rev. Billy Graham, who passed away in February 2018, still drew a huge crowd to his last crusade in New York in June 2005. A few big-name preachers, such as Joel Osteen and others, draw crowds but do not have the overall influence on U.S. society that Graham had.

⁴⁴² Ibid., 7.

preacher as an indispensable force” and that regardless of technological development, “the oral tradition will endure.”⁴⁴³

The power of the pulpit stems, in part, from the power of the religious authority behind it and, consequently, the authenticity of it.⁴⁴⁴ Southern Baptist editors, even those with little or no formal theological training, were often invited to preach. Those who had been pastors before becoming editors sometimes sought opportunities to fill in for pastors when they needed to be away from their churches. Editors also were called upon to represent the state Baptist body at church and denominational functions, such as promotion of the annual offering. Even in a state convention in which the paper was governed by a separate board under the state’s executive committee, state leaders treated the editor as it did other employed department and agency heads. Editors, including those with professional journalism training, could exert a pastoral role and adopt its authority because, in many instances, they were viewed as having pastoral authority in print. Mainstream professional journalists would not have been granted pastoral authority. Fundamental-conservatives recognized the power and religious authority of the state Baptist papers and Baptist Press and increased their complaints against the press as they pushed for denominational control.

Though fundamental-conservatives complained about editors in the past, they stepped up their vocal ire in the late 1970s, especially as they approached the 1979 Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting. As fundamental-conservatives built a coalition of likeminded individuals, they began to criticize Baptist Press and the state

⁴⁴³ Ibid., 116-117.

⁴⁴⁴ Hoover (2016), Kindle location 151.

papers as being biased toward the moderate-conservatives who led the convention through the 1960s and 1970s. They charged that the state papers and Baptist Press wrote and selected stories that favored the moderate-conservatives, and that they took every opportunity to highlight mistakes fundamental-conservatives made and to cover up those of moderate-conservatives.⁴⁴⁵ Complaints about Baptist Press took on greater significance when a two-part story about Houston State Court of Appeals Judge Paul Pressler in 1984 was released in two different Baptist Press news packets. Elected at the 1984 SBC annual meeting to serve on the Executive Committee, Judge Pressler attended his first meeting in September that year in Nashville.

A student at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary filed a complaint with the Federal Communications Commission charging Judge Pressler with taping a phone call with him without informing him the call was being recorded. Baptist Press Editor Dan Martin wrote two stories about the incident, one from the student's point of view and another that presented the judge's position. Although he intended to include both stories in the same day's news packet, a series of unforeseen events and delays slowed the second story. The student story went out in a Monday afternoon packet, with the judge's response the next day. However, because both Baptist Press and the Tennessee Baptist and Reflector are headquartered in Nashville and the state paper went to press on Monday night, the Monday news packets normally were sent by computer to the Baptist and Reflector. Consequently, the Tennessee state paper included only the student story. The paper was delivered to readers, including the Southern Baptist Convention's headquarters, the following day when the SBC Executive Board met. Judge Pressler,

⁴⁴⁵ Junker, 195.

attending his first meeting as an Executive Board member, believed Baptist Press had deliberately released the stories separately in an attempt to discredit him.⁴⁴⁶

The following February, a panel of three journalism professors that the SBPA had asked to examine the matter reported that Baptist Press and Editor Dan Martin had followed solid journalistic procedures. They found no evidence of consistent bias in Baptist Press' reporting. "BP's performance appears to be, generally, considerably above average for such news services, and meets the standards of professional practice in every way," the report noted. The panel pointed out that most editors would do as Martin had done in the situation. "To report that news, as promptly as possible, is the journalist's calling—his stewardship, in the faith." The professors did not use "the norms of behavior that exist in professional news reporting generally" as their criteria to reach their conclusion. "On the contrary, we applied standards that, in our professional judgment, are those met by news organizations of high quality and ethics." They noted Baptist Press had met standards of fairness, newsworthiness, and accuracy. "Certainly, all the stories devoted to the controversial 'Holy War' series are legitimate news stories; they are newsworthy, important, and of interest and significance to the people who make up BP's audience."⁴⁴⁷

⁴⁴⁶ Letter from J. Stafford Durham to the Federal Communications Commission, September 14, 1984. "Baptist Press Coverage Pressler/Durham Controversy," a brief overview of Dan Martin's actions chronologically from coverage of an address by Southern Baptist Theological Seminary President Roy Honeycutt to his story about a hearing at a special meeting of the Executive Committee's Public Relations Workgroup on Baptist Press' handling of the Durham story. Martin explained each step in the development of both stories and the consequences. Martin also charged that Louis Moore, well-known religion editor at *The Houston Chronicle*, threatened to file a lawsuit against him over the incident. The Southern Baptist Controversy Collection, 1980-1995, Subject File – Baptist Press, 1984-1985, 1988, 1990 (Box 2, file 2.4). Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Nashville, Tenn.

⁴⁴⁷ Clifford Christians, John DeMott, and John Merrill, "Report of Special Inquiry: Performance of the Baptist Press in news coverage of controversy over taping of Pressler/Durham telephone conversation and related matters," February 5, 1985, SBPA Minutes, 1985, Southern Baptist Press Association Records (Box 1, file 1.10).

As Baptist Press came under fire, particularly from Judge Pressler, colleagues in mainstream media assured Fields of their support. Virginia Culver, religion editor at The Denver Post, called Baptist Press staff “fair, honest, accurate reporters.” Holding to those standards is “even more difficult in a religious institution, many of which are bent on self-preservation and want their press offices to print only the fluff and good news.” Associated Press Religion Writer George Cornell called the news service “the finest example in the church world of straight, dependable journalism” and considered by religion reporters as “by far the best on the religion scene.” Cornell complimented Fields for being able to keep “really top-caliber news professionals” on his staff. He called Baptist Press “a pace-setter in its field” and noted Religion Newswriters Association officers had used it as a model in efforts for more open information in the “church realm.” Newsweek Senior Writer Kenneth L. Woodward noted, “Your operation stands out in its coverage of difficult—and, I’m sure, painful—controversies within the denomination itself.... [T]he really useful thing is the service’s reliable coverage of the tough issues.”⁴⁴⁸

A survey by Ammerman in the mid-1980s showed that moderate-conservatives got most of their news from denominational sources. She confirmed the news service was among “the most respected denominational news operations in the country.” Even though

⁴⁴⁸ Letter from Virginia Culver, religion editor at *The Denver Post*, to Wilmer C. Fields, December 31, 1984. Jim Newton, “Baptist Press: Helping Inform Southern Baptists,” *The Baptist Program*, December 1984, 11. Letter from George W. Cornell, Associated Press religion writer, to Wilmer C. Fields, January 31, 1985. Letter from Kenneth L. Woodward, *Newsweek* senior writer, to Wilmer C. Fields, December 18, 1984. The Southern Baptist Controversy Collection, 1980-1995, Subject File – Baptist Press, 1984-1985, 1988, 1990 (Box 2, file 2.4).

the fundamental-conservatives did not trust Baptist Press, moderate-conservatives “and the secular press found ‘BP’ indispensable for solid stories backed by good reporting.”⁴⁴⁹

As the controversy roared through the 1980s, editors were divided over the role Baptist Press and the state papers should play. Michael McCullough, editor of *The Nevada Baptist* in 1985, took issue with remarks Joe Ford of the Home Mission Board evangelism section made at the Nevada Evangelism Conference in January that year. McCullough agreed with the attack Ford made on mainstream media, calling Ford’s comments “strong, powerful and essentially accurate.” However, he questioned the evangelism head’s accusations that Baptist Press “was guilty of some of the same tactics and practices.” McCullough called Ford’s “generalized stroke” that included Baptist Press as “irresponsible and potentially harmful.” He reminded Ford that his listeners would have taken Ford’s comments about BP and “equated [them] with Baptist state papers.” Ford labeled Baptist Press as “an evil to be combated.”⁴⁵⁰

Once they had a majority on the SBC Executive Committee, fundamental-conservatives stepped up pressure on Baptist Press and the state papers. In its report to the SBC Peace Committee May 12-13, 1986, the political activities subcommittee insinuated the news service and the papers were guilty of “labeling and attributing improper motives” to individuals. The Peace Committee was composed of twenty-two individuals, who represented both sides in the controversy. They met fourteen times between the SBC annual meeting in June 1985 and the 1987 session, in which they

⁴⁴⁹ Ammerman, 186-187.

⁴⁵⁰ Letter from Michael B. McCullough, editor of *The Nevada Baptist*, to Joe Ford of the SBC Home Mission Board evangelism section, January 25, 1985. The Southern Baptist Controversy Collection, 1980-1995, Subject File – Baptist Press, 1984-1985, 1988, 1990 (Box 2, file 2.4).

presented their final report. No media representatives were allowed to cover the first two sessions. The committee chair issued an “official” statement at the conclusion of the first, which noted that at the end of each meeting members would decide whether the next one or parts of it would be open. Media were excluded from the second meeting because the committee talked about theology, leaders explained.

Beginning with the third meeting, members decided Martin would be allowed to attend “to represent all of the media.” In the January 20-21, 1986, session, committee members listened to an audio recording of a talk C.R. Daley, retired editor of The Western Recorder (Kentucky Baptist), made to an ethics class at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. The committee secretary recorded that “much” discussion followed but failed to provide specifics. Although they also discussed the role of the press in the controversy, they took no action. In an interview with the committee during the April 3-4, 1986, session, Judge Paul Pressler asserted that “the worst culprits in the Convention [regarding political activity] were the state Baptist papers and Baptist Press.” He also charged that an unnamed state executive director met with two editors in a men’s room in the SBC building in Nashville to discuss ways in which to discredit him.⁴⁵¹

“Judge Pressler changed the atmosphere of the Executive Committee meetings,” explained Toby Druin, an associate editor for state papers in North Carolina and Texas. Interviews with the judge were difficult. “We spent half an hour just to discuss what he meant by ‘meeting.’”⁴⁵² While a feature writer for Baptist Press, Norman Jameson also struggled with Judge Pressler. The judge wrote a note, calling a story Jameson had

⁴⁵¹ Southern Baptist Convention Peace Committee 1985-1988, (Box 1: files 1.2-1.5, Box 2: files 2.6, 2.13, 2.14, Box 3: file 3.5).

⁴⁵² Toby Druin, personal interview, Dallas, Texas, August 14, 2018.

written about him good and fair. “Then a few weeks later, Judge Pressler complained about it. . . . We were, by definition, the enemy because we were in the denominational structure. We tried to be very fair when writing stories about people who were denigrating us and the people we knew.”⁴⁵³

Speaking at the SBPA February 1986 annual meeting, Peace Committee chair Charles G. Fuller suggested Southern Baptists needed to recover a sense of mission and find a renewed sense of cooperation, among other ideas, to save the convention’s unity. He appealed to members’ sense of family, rather than to ethics or professionalism. “We desperately need to define what is Southern Baptist denominationalism. Are we primarily a fellowship of churches, or are we basically a facilitation of ministries? I think we are best defined as a family committed to be family.”⁴⁵⁴

Editors drew from both faith and professionalism to address concerns and challenges throughout the 1980s. J. Everett Sneed, then editor of *The Arkansas Baptist*, appealed to spiritual means as a first defense in an address at the SBPA 1985 annual meeting. Already under attack by fundamental-conservatives, Sneed emphasized that the state papers’ purpose “is to help churches and individuals reach more nearly the stature God intended for them to attain.” In the charged atmosphere of that time, their purpose “must always be to help, and never to hurt.” Both professional and non-professional surveys showed participants believed the editors should deal with controversy responsibly and constructively. Sneed declared editors as free to form their own opinions but from a spiritual perspective—“with all the facts in hand and under the leadership of

⁴⁵³ Norman Jameson, telephone interview, August 22, 2018.

⁴⁵⁴ Southern Baptist Convention Peace Committee (Box 1, file 1.6).

the Holy Spirit.” They had to be willing to present both sides of issues, to provide complete and accurate information, and to maintain credibility. They also were responsible to teach readers “how to determine a good publication from one which is filled with inaccuracies, half-truths and outright false information,” he declared, although he gave no guidelines for doing so. He wrapped up his presentation by appealing to the editors’ faith and Jesus’ command in the New Testament book of Matthew to love their enemies. They had to make up their minds to love, which would then “enable us to present the truth in the face of accusations and the fiery darts of our foes.”⁴⁵⁵

In an effort to clearly define parameters for the news service, some members of the Executive Committee and a three-member SBPA committee developed guidelines in 1986, which centered on professionalism, fair reporting, and ethics, with evangelism as its ultimate purpose. The first guideline clearly stated that “ownership and control...is vested in the Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention,” however, with the proviso that it “provide the required freedom and responsibility necessary” for Baptist Press to benefit Southern Baptists. The guidelines even stressed the news service was to “concentrate on news and newsworthy features” rather than on “promotional” and “routine” items. Baptist Press was directed to primarily report “positive and constructive” news, but also was given permission to “report forthrightly and accurately, without fear or favor, the valid news produced by controversy and adverse events.”⁴⁵⁶ As the controversy continued through the 1980s and 1990s, it became increasingly obvious that

⁴⁵⁵ SBPA – Papers Presented 1985, Southern Baptist Press Association Records (Box 2, File 2.11). Sneed did not provide information on the specific surveys nor the company or agency that conducted them.

⁴⁵⁶ SBPA – Minutes, 1986, Southern Baptist Press Association Records (Box 1, file 1.11); Fields Papers; Southern Baptist Convention Peace Committee Records, 1985-1988 (Box 3), Letter from Bob Terry to W.C. Fields, October 7, 1985, and Letter from W.C. Fields to Bob Terry, October 14, 1985, Southern Baptist Press Association Records (Box 1, file 1.11).

the Executive Committee was the only entity allowed to define “valid” news. Friction increased between the Executive Committee and Baptist Press with W.C. Fields’ retirement in 1987. In February 1988, the proposal to hire Alvin Shackelford to replace Fields caused “wrangling” and a close vote (32-26) to allow Shackelford to take the position.⁴⁵⁷

Members of the Executive Committee’s Public Relations Workgroup determined in 1988 Baptist Press had a “positive impact ... on the vision and involvement of our people in carrying out the mission of this denomination.” However, they also decided the news service operated with “a lack of adequate restraint” and that its news releases “have tended to positionize the Press on certain sensitive issues.” The workgroup examined Baptist Press releases from April 1987 through January 1988 to determine whether workgroup members would respond to a request to investigate the news service’s “balance, integrity, honesty, and [its] partisan politics.” After their initial inquiry, workgroup members decided not to investigate to the extent requested.

However, the group’s report to the Executive Committee in February 1988 provides insight into administrators’ understanding of the role of the press in the denomination. They used the Baptist Press operating guidelines the Executive Committee had adopted in 1986 as the criterion for their review. They recognized that Baptist Press bears the “responsibility for perceiving and communicating the truth” about Southern Baptists. They drew their definition of truth from common language among the

⁴⁵⁷ “Puckett’s Perspective: Is the End Near?” R.G. Puckett editorial, *The Biblical Recorder*, March 14, 1987, reprinted in the weekly bulletin of Providence Baptist Church, Charlotte, North Carolina (n.d.), The Southern Baptist Convention Controversy Collection, 1980-1995, Chronological file – 1988 (Box 1, File 1.13).

denominational faithful. The truth for the group was acceptance of the Bible “as the final and complete authority for faith and practice.” Then with the Bible as the basis for truth: “... it is our mandate under Christ to speak the truth in love.” The task of the Public Relations Workgroup was to determine “how to blend the twofold responsibility to ‘speak the truth’ and to speak it ‘in love.’” They determined the Baptist Press editors and writers should exercise “Christian restraint” when considering publishing releases “which tend to impugn the motives” of agencies or individuals or “which tend to revive hostile feelings among our people unnecessarily.” They pushed for the news service to initiate articles for those “put on the defensive” to “have ample opportunity to state their case” anytime the volume of releases seemed one-sided. Part of Baptist Press’ spiritual responsibility was “to minister to the hurts of our people and to administer healing in the current effort to enthrone peace among us,” workgroup members insisted. Protecting people, rather than responding as professional journalists, was the goal in order to maintain unity and peace.

Although they believed Baptist Press improved in fairness and objectivity through the period they studied, stressed they did not believe that news releases were totally free from bias. “We recognize that some bias in reporting is inevitable, since the particular orientation of a writer is sometimes reflected in his judgment.” Workgroup members believed “factualness is achievable” and stated how the news service could reach it:

We believe that a Christian desire for peace, the compulsion of love for all our Baptist people, and a commitment to the priorities of the Great Commission should provide adequate parameters within which to communicate the affairs of our convention in a manner that will help to unify and to strengthen the witness of Southern Baptists throughout the world.⁴⁵⁸

⁴⁵⁸ Public Relations Workgroup, Report of Baptist Press Reviews with Recommendations, February 1988. The Southern Baptist Convention Controversy Collection, 1980-1995, Baptist Press, 1984-1985, 1988,

Members of the Southern Baptist Press Association recognized the need to maintain their professional integrity and autonomy. In 1987, they decided an editor from among association members needed to attend all meetings of the various boards and commissions. They believed an editor's presence would, among other things, help keep the meetings open, lessen pressure on each entity's staff writer to promote one point of view, support staff writers' efforts to be objective and professional, and add credibility to the stories. The SBPA emphasized that members wanted to send a representative so that they would have story options. The SBPA representative was to share his story with Baptist Press, if he chose to write one, and Baptist Press was expected to share its stories, as well.⁴⁵⁹

The state paper editors also conducted their own survey of Baptist Press releases, reviewing news packets released from April 1, 1987, when Shackleford officially took over the director's duties, through December that year. The nine SBPA editors who reviewed the material determined Baptist Press "did an outstanding job" during the period and that "[t]here was no bias in one direction or the other." The report, distributed to the Executive Committee and others, declared the group "found no evidence of any deviation from first-class, professional reporting..."⁴⁶⁰ In addition, the Southern Baptist

1990 (Box 2, File 2.4) and SBPA – Annual Meeting, 1988, Southern Baptist Press Association Records (Box 1, File 1.13).

⁴⁵⁹ SBPA – Annual Meeting – 1987, Southern Baptist Press Association Records (Box 1, file 1.12). Dave Lucus, editor of the *Southern Baptist Journal*, an independent fundamental-conservative paper, made a motion at the 1987 SBC annual meeting in St. Louis for the convention to investigate Baptist Press. The motion was referred to the Executive Committee. See Morgan, 158.

⁴⁶⁰ Letter from the Baptist Press Liaison Committee, Donald T. McGregor, Chairman, to the SBC Executive Committee, February 5, 1988, with the Survey of Baptist Press Material to Determine Objectivity, SBPA – Annual Meeting – 1988, Southern Baptist Press Association Records (Box 1, File 1.13).

Press Association issued a statement of support for the news service. Members insisted the news service had to report even controversy to fulfill its purpose of keeping Southern Baptists informed. They stressed Baptist Press' fair, accurate, comprehensive, and objective reporting.⁴⁶¹ They appealed to journalistic professionalism, rather than to Scripture or unity.

When Don McGregor presented the SBPA survey to the public relations workgroup, he emphasized the editors realized the issue was not Al Shackleford as a person but the journalistic principle of a free and unfettered press. "Any controls that might be placed on Baptist Press that would tend to limit its ability to report the news, all the news, in a fair and objective manner would cast a cloud on its use. Such action would damage the credibility of Baptist Press. Loss of credibility, simply, would destroy it." He insisted the Executive Committee did not need to control the news service because the state papers already monitored content by insisting that Baptist Press feed all news to the state papers. The editors then would choose the news they wanted to publish. McGregor called Baptist Press "a wonderful medium for conveying news and information.... That is the function of Baptist Press. It can fulfill that function only in freedom."⁴⁶²

The Executive Board and fundamental-conservative leaders were intent upon returning to a "house-organ" relationship between the press and the SBC and affiliated state conventions. Southern Baptist Press Association members continued to resist through the 1980s and early 1990s. In a 1987 address, Doran McCarty, a professor at

⁴⁶¹ A Statement of Support For Baptist Press, SBPA – Annual Meeting – 1988, Southern Baptist Press Association Records (Box 1, File 1.13).

⁴⁶² Report to SBC Public Relations Workgroup, Nashville, TN, February 22, 1988. SBPA – Annual Meeting, 1988, Southern Baptist Press Association Records (Box 1, file 1.13).

Golden Gate Theological Seminary, reminded members how far the state papers had progressed from their days as house organs. When they were completely independent, papers that promoted Baptist work tended to be highly polemic, directly attacking ideas and the people who espoused them. As state conventions acquired individual papers, each editor chose to promote his state's programs and follow the executive director's philosophy. McCarty considered some early editors as "only 'copy boys' printing the articles the Executive Director suggested." Anything controversial was presented as black or white, and the editors had influence in the election of their respective state convention officers. The professor considered the papers as house organs because each focused on the "greatness" of the state convention, its leaders, and its programs.

As Southern Baptists became more educated and affluent, they demanded professionalism. Editors shifted from using an advocacy style to a reportorial style and developed their papers as news magazines. The professor believed independent Baptist papers that appeared in the 1980s marked a return to the house organ purpose of the past. He reminded editors that "information is a source of power." The state paper editors were Baptist power brokers because they served as information managers. The pressure during the upheaval of the 1980s increased on the editors because people had more access to offset presses and computerized mailing lists,⁴⁶³ the technology they needed to start independent newspapers.

The new papers that popped up in the late 1970s and through the 1980s were primarily started by fundamental-conservatives. They were able to identify the symbols and rhetorical styles that captured grassroots emotions, to make use of mass media, and to

⁴⁶³ Doran McCarty, "Reflections on Editors as Power Persons," SBPA – Papers presented – 1987, Southern Baptist Press Association Records (Box 2, File 2.13).

effectively communicate.⁴⁶⁴ Several pastors met at First Baptist Church in Atlanta to launch The Southern Baptist Journal. Conservatives started the Southern Baptist Advocate in the mid-1980s. In addition, fundamental-conservatives founded Mid-America Baptist Seminary in 1972 and the International Council on Inerrancy in 1977.⁴⁶⁵ Hankins argues that fundamental-conservatives successfully developed alternative schools and newspapers because they connected more closely to the majority of Southern Baptists. At the time, the SBC “was becoming the most visible and influential force on the conservative side of the “culture” war in the broader society.”⁴⁶⁶

As pressure increased, moderate-conservatives also launched a few independent papers. SBC Today began in 1983 with Walker Knight as editor. Knight had left his position as director of editorial services at the Home Mission Board and as editor of the board’s magazine. Most Home Mission Board trustees had been replaced with fundamental-conservatives, and Knight believed he would be pushed out. A group of moderate-conservatives met in Louisville, Kentucky, to start the paper. “They wanted me to be more of a firebrand,” Knight said. He refused to compromise his journalistic integrity and agreed to be editor with the understanding that he would publish their information under their names.⁴⁶⁷ Moderate-conservatives also produced the Baptist Laity Journal and The Call, which Ammerman tagged as “political journals.”⁴⁶⁸

⁴⁶⁴ Ammerman, 183, 211.

⁴⁶⁵ Ammerman, 69.

⁴⁶⁶ Hankins, 9.

⁴⁶⁷ Walker L. Knight, personal interview in Atlanta, Georgia, October 15, 2018. The publication began as *SBC Today*. The name was changed to *Baptists Today* when Jack Harwell became editor on June 1, 1988. It now operates as *Nurturing Faith*.

Editors of moderate-conservative publications also faced criticism, and not just from fundamental-conservatives. Christian Life Commission Director Foy Valentine cornered Susan Taylor, first associate editor for SBC Today, as she covered a CLC meeting, telling her to report favorably or he would see that the news journal would be put out of business.⁴⁶⁹

As the fundamental-conservatives gained a majority on agency trustee boards, the demarcation between the institutional, public relations model and the adversarial, independent model of journalism became more pronounced. Fundamental-conservatives and moderate-conservatives perceived each other as adversaries. The fundamental group saw Baptist Press and the state papers as an arm of the moderate faction. Baptist Press covered both the fundamental and moderate rallies in the early 1980s. However, most state paper editors supported the moderates in their editorials. “As a result, the entire denominational media establishment was soon branded as blatantly pro-liberal,”⁴⁷⁰ by the fundamental-conservative faction.

As they gained control, fundamental-conservatives hardened their concept of their role as leader-publisher of Baptist Press, and later of state papers as they gained control in state conventions. Concerned with providing only positive information about the Southern Baptist Convention, with pushing adherence to denominational requirements, and with conformance to biblical interpretation, the fundamental-conservatives tightened control over the denominational press. Freedom of the press and editorial autonomy were

⁴⁶⁸ Ammerman, 187.

⁴⁶⁹ Walker L. Knight, personal interview in Atlanta, Georgia, October 15, 2018.

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid.

targeted. By the middle of the 1980s, the moderate-conservatives tried to push back. The Southern Baptist Press Association passed a resolution calling for all agencies and committees to hold open meetings. Members appealed to the SBC's democratic polity and expressed their "deep concern" that business sessions were held behind closed doors.⁴⁷¹ They also passed several resolutions in support of Baptist Press and the targeted editors. The fundamental contingent forced out agency directors and other moderate leaders, including journalists.

Although Martin and Shackleford received the most press coverage in the denominational and mainstream press, they were not the first editors to lose their jobs. Jack Gritz, editor of the state Baptist paper in Oklahoma, was dismissed from his post in the fall of 1979. In 1981, Gene Medaris, editor of the Indiana state paper resigned after being challenged by the new executive director, who was upset with the editor's coverage of gifts to the retiring executive and insisted Medaris should clear letters from readers with the executive director before they were published. The editor refused. Angry, the executive director took the issue to the state's executive board. As the conflict grew, Medaris was not allowed to defend himself and opted to resign rather than be fired.⁴⁷²

Although they had stirred conflict over the state paper as early as 1980, fundamental-conservatives had gained enough strength in Georgia to increase pressure on The Christian Index Editor Jack Harwell in 1986. Board members questioned his stand on

⁴⁷¹ "Resolution" and a letter from Lynn P. Clayton, president of the Southern Baptist Press Association, to Darold H. Morgan, October 14, 1986, SBPA – Annual Meeting – 1986, Southern Baptist Press Association Records (Box 1, file 1.11).

⁴⁷² Gene Medaris, "Position Paper Concerning the Censure of the Editor of the Indiana Baptist State Paper on January 23, 1981," Southern Baptist Press Association – Annual Meeting – 1981, Southern Baptist Press Association Records (Box 1, File 1.6).

several issues and labeled him as a liberal. In August that year, the Georgia Baptist Convention Executive Committee established The Index Review Board to monitor Harwell's editorials. Harwell almost resigned at that point. Several friends and colleagues suggested he should have done so because the paper's integrity had been compromised, and they viewed resignation as unavoidable. Drawing on his Christian beliefs, Harwell responded, "But God did not tell me to resign." In the summer of 1987, review board members said they would recommend termination if the editor violated their guidelines one more time. Conflict between the fundamental-conservative and moderate-conservative factions boiled during the 1987 Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting. Harwell felt his coverage of that meeting showed him he had compromised his beliefs about his editorial role. "I saw that I had not written my conscience in a single one of those issues. I had written what I knew would pass muster with the Review Board, not what I thought to be true and honest and prophetic. I could no longer live with the restrictions and censorship...." He submitted his resignation.

However, a majority of Southern Baptists across the state did not want him to resign. A motion was made at the Georgia Baptist Convention's annual meeting in November, asking Harwell to reconsider his decision and calling for the dismissal of the review board. With minimal discussion, the motion passed by an estimated 65 to 75 percent margin. Because of the strong support, Harwell decided to rescind his resignation. However, the newspaper's trustees took no action on his request, leaving the decision to the Executive Committee. When that body met, the Index trustee president and secretary spoke against allowing Harwell to remain.⁴⁷³ In a resolution of affirmation

⁴⁷³ "Harwell Announces Early Retirement," *The Christian Index*, November 5, 1987. Jack U. Harwell, "Looking Out," *The Christian Index*, November 5, 1987. William Neal, "Editor to Reconsider Early

for Harwell at the SBPA annual meeting in 1988, editors expressed hope that others would not lose their jobs: “In affirming our brother we pray not many will be called upon to pay the price he has paid as a defender of the faith and proclaimer of truth.” They added, “He exemplifies what is most worthy in the calling to the ministry of Baptist journalism.”⁴⁷⁴ Harwell became editor of SBC Today on June 1 that year.

Fundamental-conservative leaders increased attacks on the press. At the 1989 SBPA annual meeting, Shackleford reported Baptist Press was being pressured to stop carrying news articles about the Southern Baptist Alliance, a moderate-conservative group, and for the Washington bureau no longer to attend meetings of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs. Leaders also objected to reporting about student protests at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary following the resignation of the institution’s president. However, Paul Pressler criticized the news service for failure to report the faculty members who also protested.⁴⁷⁵ Pressler stepped up his criticism, sending letters to Shackleford and Martin with detailed points on each item of reporting with which he disagreed and demanding answers. Prominent pastors, such as Ronnie Floyd of First Baptist Church in Springdale, Arkansas, and a member of the Executive Committee, added pressure. Harmony should be the goal of the news service and state papers. When it was not, the Bible and Christian ethics were at stake, Floyd insisted.⁴⁷⁶

Retirement,” *The Christian Index*, November 19, 1987. “EC Affirms Harwell Early Retirement,” *The Christian Index*, December 31, 1987.

⁴⁷⁴ “Affirmation of Jack U. Harwell” SBPA – Annual Meeting, 1988, Southern Baptist Press Association Records (Box 1, file 1.13).

⁴⁷⁵ SBPA – Annual Meeting, 1989, Southern Baptist Press Association Records (Box 1, File 1.14).

⁴⁷⁶ Letter from Ronnie W. Floyd to Dan Martin, April 6, 1990, Southern Baptist Press Association – Correspondence – Floyd, Ronnie, Southern Baptist Press Association Records (Box 1, File 1.28).

In a 1989 report to the Executive Committee, the SBPA's press liaison committee reminded SBC leaders about Baptist Press' duties, admitting that the news service was "not error-free." However, it had to function among critics. On the one hand, the news service had been faulted for trying to make an agency look good in the past. On the other hand, it was "faulted by the same people for objective news writing instead of trying to make the Executive Committee look good." The press liaison committee reminded leaders that the news service was not a promotional tool. Instead, it was to "present the whole truth in an objective and straightforward manner" because it was to serve all Southern Baptists.⁴⁷⁷

Gustav Niebuhr, religion editor for the Wall Street Journal, affirmed the news service in presentations to the Southern Baptist Press Association at its annual meeting in February 1990. He described reporting religious news as exciting because a two-party religious system did not exist. Labels like conservative and liberal had no meaning because millions of people do not belong to either group. To report only on those labels left everyone else out. The main function of religious reporting is not to build a consensus but to be honest and objective in reporting. While Niebuhr stressed honest reporting, Al Mohler, then editor of The Christian Index, stressed correction. A fundamental-conservative, Mohler emphasized, "Our business is truth-telling, always dangerous, but we must be responsible, open to correction."⁴⁷⁸ He did not elaborate on his definition of an editor's responsibility or who could correct him.

⁴⁷⁷ "Additional Thoughts of the Liaison Committee Members," Southern Baptist Press Association – Baptist Press – History, Southern Baptist Press Association Records (Box 1, File 1.23).

⁴⁷⁸ "Minutes: Annual Meeting of the Southern Baptist Press Association, February 14-16, 1990," Southern Baptist Press Association – Annual Meeting – 1990, Southern Baptist Press Association Records (Box 1, File 1.15).

By April 1990, the growing move against Baptist Press forced Al Shackleford to respond in writing to criticism from the Executive Committee and prominent fundamental-conservatives. As an Executive Committee member, Judge Pressler, with the help of five others, on July 5 called on Shackleford and Martin to resign. In response, longtime mainstream newsman Bill Moyers urged Presnall Wood of the Texas Baptist Standard to try to rally Southern Baptists. Moyers believed Pressler targeted Shackleford and Martin because Baptist Press published a statement Moyers made against Pressler at the 1989 Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting. Moyers pointed out the paradox newswriters in Southern Baptist press faced between faith and professional values:

“In the interest of fairness—Baptist Press’s long tradition of telling both sides of an argument—Shackleford and Martin carried a straightforward and accurate account of the dispute, quoting not only Pressler but me. Pressler was livid. He had demanded subservience and—God have mercy on them—two honest men had refused to give it. Theirs was a loyalty to a higher cause, and now they would be punished by this little dictator so puffed up with power that he cannot distinguish God’s will from his own whims.”⁴⁷⁹

Virginia Baptist Religious Herald Editor Julian Pentecost also believed the Moyers incident played a large role in the push for the two men’s resignation. At the 1988 SBC annual meeting, Pressler’s proposal for more restrictive guidelines for the news service was defeated by only two votes in the Executive Committee session. Pentecost charged that Pressler wanted a press “willing to be compromised to satisfy his irresponsible and indefensible expectations. Such a press would be neither free nor responsible....” Calling freedom of the press “an issue of superlative importance,” the editor mentioned a conversation with Shackleford in which the Baptist Press director

⁴⁷⁹ Letter from Bill Moyers to Presnall Wood, July 5, 1990, The Southern Baptist Controversy Collection, 1980-1995 – People File – Moyers, Bill, 1989-1990 (Box 1, File 1.40), Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Nashville, Tenn.

called press restrictions an attempt to restrict Southern Baptists' right to know. Control of the press was evidence that "the officers of the Executive Committee do not trust [people] with the truth and are seeking to deprive them of their access to a fair, objective and balanced news service." Although many fundamental-conservatives "insist they believe in a free press," they still pressed for the two Baptist Press leaders to resign. Pentecost responded, "We believe the only valid interpretation of the incompatibility of their words and their actions is they have not yet begun to understand at all the meaning of freedom of the press."⁴⁸⁰

On July 17, 1990, behind closed doors, the SBC Executive Committee fired Shackleford and Martin. In a written statement to the committee, Shackleford couched his response in both theological and journalistic terms: God had "clearly revealed" that he was to accept the position in the first place, and his "God-called ministry is based on Baptists' right to the free flow of information."⁴⁸¹ Martin's statement followed a similar vein. "I have attempted to follow three basic rules: First, tell the truth and trust the people. Second, report the news without fear or favor. Third, do unto others as you would have them do unto you."⁴⁸²

Immediately after the Executive Committee ended its session and issued a statement about the firings, attorney Jeffrey Mobley announced the establishment of an

⁴⁸⁰ Julian H. Pentecost, "'Freedom of the Press' But Not Baptist Press?" *Religious Herald*, July 5, 1990, The Southern Baptist Convention Controversy Collection, 1980-1995 (Box 2, file 2.4).

⁴⁸¹ Alvin C. Shackleford, "Statement to the Administrative and Convention Arrangements Subcommittee," The Southern Baptist Convention Controversy Collection, 1980-1995 – Baptist Press 1984-1985, 1988, 1990 (Box 2, file 2.4).

⁴⁸² Dan Martin, "Statement of Dan Martin, SBC Executive Committee, July 17, 1990," The Southern Baptist Convention Controversy Collection, 1980-1995 – Baptist Press 1984-1985, 1988, 1990 (Box 2, file 2.4).

alternative news service, Associated Baptist Press. Founders concluded that Baptist Press would no longer be fair and balanced. Associated Baptist Press directors formed the news service as “a practical expression” of the “biblical principle of the personal priesthood of each believer ... enabling each Baptist to make appropriate and necessary decisions about the Lord’s work.”⁴⁸³ The Southern Baptist Press Association endorsed ABP and presented a resolution on Southern Baptists’ right to know at a special called meeting following the firings. Herb Hollinger, editor of the California Southern Baptist, was named vice president-Baptist Press, responsible only for the news service. When asked if he had been given any assurances about freedom for the news service, Hollinger responded he had nothing in writing.

Southern Baptist Press Association editors struggled with their position. A discussion followed two presentations about the future of Baptist journalism during their 1991 annual meeting. “You have to do what is right — if you are going to get fired, it won’t make any difference if you’re quiet or bold,” John Roberts of the Oklahoma paper said. Lynn Clayton of Louisiana reminded editors that “taking a stand might only accelerate the process,” especially if a move had already been initiated.⁴⁸⁴ “After the takeover, objectivity was no longer important,” Norman Jameson explained. News was to be reported from the perspective of the bosses. “‘I expect you to write only the good’ was the idea.”⁴⁸⁵

⁴⁸³ “Statement Announcing Associated Baptist Press, July 17, 1990” and “Mission Statement, Associated Baptist Press (ABP), September 11-12, 1990, Southern Baptist Press Association – Associated Baptist Press – Bylaws/Charter/Statement of Mission, Southern Baptist Press Association Records (Box 1, File 1.21).

⁴⁸⁴ SBPA – Annual Meeting – 1991, Southern Baptist Press Association Records (Box 1, File 1.16).

⁴⁸⁵ Norman Jameson, phone interview, August 22, 2018.

Southern Baptist journalism had come full circle, in a sense. The news service faced the prospect of being little more than a public relations platform for the Southern Baptist Convention and its Executive Committee. Throughout the 1990s, several state Baptist papers also returned to the state convention support role they had taken in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Fundamental-conservatives gained control of most state conventions through the 1990s in much the same way they had done with the Southern Baptist Convention. Editors considered as moderate were either forced out or were removed from their posts. Because fundamental-conservatives were unsuccessful in taking over the state conventions in Texas and Virginia, they started conservative conventions with their own papers. Jameson believes that by the mid- to late-1990s, Baptist Press and many of the state papers carried more advocacy and opinion pieces, that they became less news oriented and that they provided more public relations.⁴⁸⁶ Many of the state Baptist papers returned to their roots, and Baptist Press became the Southern Baptist Convention's public relations arm.

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid.

CONCLUSION

The effects of tightened control of the Southern Baptist press still lingered twenty years after Al Shackleford and Dan Martin lost their positions as Baptist Press news service director and news editor, respectively. On Oct. 21, 2010, Norman Jameson tendered his resignation as editor of the North Carolina Baptist Convention's *Biblical Recorder* after three years. He had been under fire in one of the last Southern Baptist Convention-affiliated state bodies to shift further to the political and theological right. Jameson stepped down after state convention leaders threatened to withdraw funding from the paper if he did not.⁴⁸⁷ Issues of lived religion and press autonomy brought Southern Baptist journalists almost full circle in their effort to serve God as professionals.

The religious press has been viewed as less worthy and less professional by media scholars, despite the fact that religious media reaches millions of people. Technological advances, including radio, television, digital platforms, and social media, have allowed religious groups of all types to share their ideology and commentary on social and cultural issues across the globe. Because religion has been and remains an integral aspect of human society, exploring the ways in which religious media developed contributes to the historical understanding of journalism as a profession. Journalism has been described as a belief system⁴⁸⁸—an “ism”—that can and often does clash with other “isms.” Journalists in religious media balance faith, the specific faith tradition for which they work, and professionalism. Mainstream journalists recognized Southern Baptist journalists as professionals throughout the study period.

⁴⁸⁷ William R. Webb, “Similar lessons from two events,” *Word & Way*, October 29, 2010, <https://wordandway.org/2010/10/29/similar-lessons-from-two-events/>, accessed November 28, 2018.

⁴⁸⁸ Nerone, 447.

This study contributes to the understanding of the concept of independence and autonomy of the press and the difficulty the press experiences when choosing between releasing a negative story and facing the consequences corporate owners, advertisers, or readers might impose. It demonstrates the influence of the concept of freedom of the press, even within closed institutions. Southern Baptist editors were considered leaders of authority until the Southern Baptist Convention shifted further to the theological and political right. Then, SBC leaders forced out editors who tried to maintain press freedom and determined that the denomination's journalism should follow the public relations model, rather than the adversarial, independent model favored by the mainstream press.

Southern Baptist newswriters exhibited the traits, practices and beliefs that mark journalistic professionalism—an association/professional organization (formed in 1895), a formalized code of ethics, formal and informal training, a news culture, and common news values and ideology. Tension built as they pushed for independence and autonomy, a move that saw success through the Civil Rights era but that denominational forces blocked during the SBC's shift further to the theological and political right. The journalists enjoyed greater freedom during and as an outcome of the Civil Rights Movement, particularly as denominational leaders encouraged church members to turn from racism and to accept believers of all races. Institutional pressures increased on journalists and freedom began to be curtailed as denominational leaders, both at national and state levels, adopted more conservative theological and political ideals. Leaders tightened control on coverage, insisting its national news service, Baptist Press, should function as a promotional tool. As fundamental-conservatives gained control of each state convention, leaders also tightened control of their respective papers.

“Trust the Lord and tell the people” became the watchword for Southern Baptist journalists as they sought to tell the stories of pastors, missionaries, and churches that impacted their communities. The phrase captured the struggle newswriters often encountered as they strove to be journalism professionals who used their skills in what they considered as Christian ministry. Often, they were caught between the values they held as Christian believers and the journalistic values they held as newswriters. The Civil Rights Movement and the shift of the Southern Baptist Convention further to the right politically and theologically through the 1980s and early 1990s impacted the SBC journalists’ understanding of their professional role. They grasped more clearly that professionalism required them to report even the negative news—national and state convention mistakes, leader miscues, and disagreements over theology and philosophy. They approached news about the Civil Rights Movement and the Southern Baptist Convention’s potential involvement tentatively, uncertain as to their reportorial role. As Southern Baptist journalists practiced balance and fairness in reporting, they shifted from serving primarily as denominational promoters to promoters with a watchdog role. Throughout the study period, journalists held onto what they perceived as their prophetic role. They pursued their efforts as lived religion—practicing journalism with integrity and ethics based in faith as they understood it.

Southern Baptist journalists were granted a form of professionalism because many were clergy and already considered professional. They took a further step toward professionalization with the formation of the Southern Baptist Press Association in 1895. The group had a code of ethics and promoted formal and informal training at each annual meeting and through summer workshops. The SBPA tapped mainstream journalists to

present information and how-tos at meetings and utilized professors from prominent journalism departments and schools, including Syracuse University and the University of Missouri. Southern Baptist journalists developed a common news culture, especially with the formation of the denomination's news service, Baptist Press, in 1947. They held the news values of accuracy, fairness, and honesty in common. They shared the desire to inform members in local churches of the actions and pronouncements of the national body and of their respective state convention. As the news service developed, state paper editors were able to reach a broader audience with news from their regions. The editors also were able to retrieve stories of missionaries and their work more quickly from the Home and Foreign Mission boards. They could share news and mission stories from their states as well.

This dissertation has illustrated how Southern Baptist journalists lived their religion through the practice of journalism in spite of the denomination's institutional barriers. They lived their faith because they viewed journalism as a form of ministry. Their primary focus was to minister to readers by sharing stories and information. J. Terry Young, editor of the *California Southern Baptist* listed three roles: as prophet, minister, and catalyst.⁴⁸⁹ From its foundation, the Southern Baptist Press Association emphasized the prophet/ministry role at each annual meeting. Each session of the two-day event opened with a devotional thought usually by an editor or a Southern Baptist Convention administrator. The journalists believed they were to be a voice. Some saw their voice as having religious authority, much like that of a pastor. Most of them

⁴⁸⁹ Fields Papers and "Baptist Editors Protest Restrictions on Press Freedom" in the Baptist Press February 19, 1973 news packet (Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives digital resources, http://www.sbhla.org/bp_archive/index.asp.)

believed they were journalists in a denominational setting because God had placed them in their jobs.⁴⁹⁰ The practice of journalism in a religious setting is an act of lived religion. Reporting the news in a timely manner “is the journalist’s calling—his stewardship, in the faith.”⁴⁹¹ The SBPA also emphasized God’s call through presentations at its annual meetings, such as “Writing for Christ’s Sake” in 1957 and writing as ministry in 1964. Attendees at the 1977 and 1979 meetings were reminded of their prophetic role. Journalists needed “to move with authority” within journalism and theology.⁴⁹² After the national convention split in 1990, Southern Baptist Press Association members continued to emphasize their role in helping readers live out their faith in practices. “The challenge is to speak in a language that is understandable with a message that is relevant to the audience. Newspapers must be helpful to the reader in living the Christian life. Readers must be able to see that the paper is of value in their spiritual pilgrimage.”⁴⁹³

Even as journalists were aware of the role faith played, they also were confronted with the institutional push for unity and harmony through promotion. Freedom of the press and autonomy became the professional values most at stake for Southern Baptist journalists as denominational leaders insisted Baptist Press and the state papers should concentrate on promotion. As journalists were challenged, their appeal to what they perceived as God’s will often clashed with SBC and state convention leaders’ understanding. Alvin Shackleford expressed the dichotomy in a written statement to the

⁴⁹⁰ Cheavens, “The Ministry of Writing.”

⁴⁹¹ Christians, DeMott, and Merrill, “Report of Special Inquiry.”

⁴⁹² Fields Papers, Letter from Wilmer C. Fields to Charles R. Richardson, January 19, 1976.

⁴⁹³ Marv Knox, SBPA Minutes – 1991, Southern Baptist Press Association Records (Box 1, file 1.16).

SBC Executive Committee when he and Dan Martin were fired from Baptist Press:

“[T]he two convictions that led me here [to his job] have not changed [since he was hired]: (1) God had clearly revealed to me that it was His will that I accept this position; and (2) my God-called ministry is based on Baptists’ right to the free flow of information.”⁴⁹⁴

Even though Southern Baptists built their organization on the concept of Baptist democracy, they struggled to make sure that democracy led to unity. The editors were to inform readers, which was supposed to lead to greater cooperation among Southern Baptists. Baptist democracy was tied to the theological concept of soul competency and priesthood of the believer, the idea that each believer could approach God on his or her own.

Denominational unity was stretched during the Civil Rights Movement because the editors were divided over their acceptance of Blacks. Some, such as Leon Macon of Alabama, were ardent segregationists. Others, such as John J. Hurt of Georgia, wanted desegregation to take place slowly. Southern Baptist Convention leaders also were divided. Agencies, like the Christian Life Commission, were proactive and pushed for integrated schools and equality in housing and other services. Because the SBC executive director and enough additional administrators pushed for compliance with federal law, the SBC was able to maintain enough unity to weather criticism. Editors often did not deal with the broader social issues raised by racism. Instead, they concentrated on telling the stories of the specific ministries their state conventions were doing for Blacks. Editors

⁴⁹⁴ Alvin C. Shackelford, “Statement to the Administrative and Convention Arrangements Subcommittee,” July 17, 1990. The Southern Baptist Convention Controversy Collection, 1980-1995 – Baptist Press 1984-1985, 1988, 1990 (Box 2, File 2.4).

generally were unwilling to be too vocal about African-American rights. For the most part, they did not cover civil rights violence or participate in protests with clergy. Most Baptist editors tried to walk a middle-of-the-road position, centering on public schools, obedience to the law, and the effect of continued U.S. segregation on mission efforts overseas.

By the time the fundamental-conservative faction gained sufficient strength within the Southern Baptist Convention to influence the body's direction in the late 1970s, the state papers and Baptist Press had hired journalists, particularly as associate editors, who had academic training, who had mainstream journalism experience, or who had both. Most wanted freedom to report both the positive and negative aspects of the national and state bodies. Freedom of the press and autonomy of its journalists became part of the split between fundamental-conservatives and moderate-conservatives. Southern Baptist journalism essentially returned to its promotional roots as editors and journalists deemed moderates or liberals were either fired outright or forced to resign.

The 1990 firing of Al Shackleford and Dan Martin marked the shift in understanding of press freedom for Baptist newswriters. Those who chose to continue to live their faith as Southern Baptist journalists were required to accept restrictions on their press freedom. Journalists who believed press autonomy meant the free flow of both positive and negative information had to look elsewhere for jobs. Southern Baptists could stress democracy and autonomy for everyone, except their press.

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