

ALTERNATIVE THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION IN THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST
CONVENTION: A CASE STUDY OF MID-AMERICA BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL
SEMINARY

James A. Patterson

The cover of the spring 1999 issue of the Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary *Messenger* proudly displayed a full-color picture of Seminary President Michael R. Spradlin shaking hands with Jerry Rankin, President of the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. Dr. Rankin, along with other IMB personnel, recently had participated in Mid-America's Global Missions Week, which was held in February of 1999. In fact, Rankin's fairly regular visits to the MABTS campus since he assumed leadership of the then Foreign Mission Board in 1993 stood in stark contrast to the distant connection between Mid-America and his predecessor, R. Keith Parks.¹ The more cordial MABTS-IMB relationship conveyed by the Spradlin-Rankin handclasp was symptomatic of just how far the Seminary had enhanced its overall position within the SBC.

For more than thirty years MABTS has identified itself as a unique educational institution in Southern Baptist life. For example, the school consistently sets forth in catalogs and promotional materials the following distinctives regarding its instructional staff:

Every faculty member accepts the plenary verbal inspiration of the Bible.
Every faculty member is a faithful witness for Jesus Christ. Every faculty member is an active member of a cooperating Southern Baptist church.
Every faculty member in the theological field holds an earned doctorate.
Every faculty member is available for counseling with students.²

While these attributes may appear to be unremarkable in light of changes at Cooperative Program seminaries over the past decade, for many years they clearly served to set Mid-America apart as an alternative theological institution or as a seminary with a difference. Indeed, MABTS's evangelistic and doctrinal stances initially implied that the traditional SBC seminaries were lacking in areas that were valued highly by Southern Baptist conservatives.

At the same time that Mid-America unapologetically emphasized the alternative character of its educational venture, it also strongly desired recognition and acceptance as a genuinely Southern Baptist school. Shunning separatism, the Seminary vigorously supported many SBC causes, built a faculty and student body from Southern Baptist

¹On Rankin's elevation to the post of IMB President, see Jesse C. Fletcher, *The Southern Baptist Convention: A Sesquicentennial History* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 352–56. For examples of Rankin's speaking engagements at MABTS, see "Foreign Mission Board on Campus to Lead 'Global Missions Week,'" *Messenger* 24 (Spring 1996): 1 and 3; "Global Missions Week," *Messenger* 27 (Spring 1999): 9; and "Mid-America Hosts Global Missions Week," *Messenger* 33 (Winter 2004): 4. The Spradlin-Rankin picture was included in the MABTS *Catalog* 29-30 (2000–2002): 30.

²MABTS *Catalog* 33–34 (2004–2006): 14. Cf. a very similar list in B. Gray Allison, promotional letter from Ruston, Louisiana, to "Baptist Friends," 1971–72.

ranks, and carefully cultivated a largely Southern Baptist constituency. Thus an interesting dynamic runs through the history of MABTS--distinctiveness is coupled with intense denominational loyalty, a volatile combination that has not always been successfully held together. Nonetheless, an essential component of the Mid-America story can be found in the struggle to balance alternative theological education with a generally constructive denominational posture.

BACKGROUND: THE SBC BATTLE FOR THE BIBLE IN THE 1950s AND 1960s

During the 1950s, MABTS founder B. Gray Allison was a student and faculty member at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, an official SBC school. Reared in northwest Louisiana and a fighter pilot in World War II, Allison experienced an agonizing call to preach before enrolling at New Orleans to pursue the B.D. and Th.D. degrees. Later he taught church history, evangelism, and missions at the southern Louisiana school.³ Although the young seminarian and professor admired much about NOBTS and later implemented certain features of the institution's curriculum when he started Mid-America, Allison also grew increasingly uneasy about theological trends in the SBC. His experiences both as a student and faculty member alerted him that some professors at New Orleans held views concerning biblical authority and the Atonement that were closer to neo-orthodoxy or liberalism than to the Southern Baptist mainstream.⁴ As David Dockery, then an editor at Broadman Press, noted in 1991 during an address at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, the 1950s saw the introduction of higher critical methods in Southern Baptist colleges and seminaries; at the same time, SBC agencies were actively promoting a program-oriented approach to ministry.⁵ While the significance of these trends was not immediately apparent to many Southern Baptists, it is clear from historical hindsight that the stage was being set for the controversy that broke out so openly in 1979.

No doubt some of what Allison observed at NOBTS ultimately contributed to his decision to start a new theological institution. In addition, he taught evangelism and missions to students like Junior Hill, Adrian Rogers, and Jerry Vines, all of whom later became good friends of Mid-America as well as recognized leaders of the conservative movement in the SBC.⁶ Hence the New Orleans years revealed to Allison some brewing theological challenges and also put him in touch with individuals who shared his concerns.

Throughout the 1960s Allison and other conservatives in the SBC became increasingly troubled about theological trends in the Cooperative Program seminaries and

³For a biographical sketch of Allison, see James A. Patterson, *To All the World: A History of Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, 1972–1997* (Memphis: Disciple Press, 1997), 10–21.

⁴B. Gray Allison, interview by author, 16 May 1996, tape recording and transcript, Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, Germantown, TN.

⁵“Inerrancy Controversy Roots Deeper Than Past 12 Years, Dockery Says,” *Baptist & Reflector*, 6 February 1991, 5.

⁶See B. Gray Allison interview; also Adrian Rogers, interview by author, 9 September 1996, tape recording and transcript, Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, Germantown, TN.

the apparent indifference toward this in the SBC bureaucracy. Alarms were sounded as early as 1961 with the release of Ralph Elliott's *The Message of Genesis* by Broadman Press, the book-publishing arm of the Baptist Sunday School Board.⁷ Elliott, a professor of Old Testament at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, accepted many of the higher critical theories characteristic of the nineteenth-century Graf-Wellhausen school. For instance, Elliott suggested multiple authors for the Pentateuch, questioned the historicity of Genesis by comparing some of its accounts to the parables of Jesus, interpreted "Adam" as a symbolic name for all mankind, and denied that there was a universal Flood. At the same time, he affirmed that Genesis still communicated religious "truth," despite packaging that he judged to be defective.⁸

The Elliott commentary touched off extensive discussion in the SBC. Some suspected that the Midwestern professor had put in print what others were offering in classrooms at SBC institutions. In fact, Elliott later acknowledged that his 1961 volume represented "a popularizing of some of my lecture notes."⁹ By late 1961 the Sunday School Board felt compelled to defend its right to publish materials that reflected different viewpoints in Southern Baptist life. The controversy reached the floor of the Convention at San Francisco in 1962, where Herschel Hobbs, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Oklahoma City, worked hard to maintain denominational peace. The messengers, however, approved two key resolutions that spoke directly to concerns about Elliott's book. First, they affirmed their belief that the entire Bible was "the authoritative, authentic, infallible Word of God." Second, they expressed strong objections to any teachings in the seminaries that might undermine "the historical accuracy and doctrinal integrity of the Bible."¹⁰ Thus the Convention openly served notice that theological education in the SBC would henceforth receive more careful scrutiny.

The fallout from the Elliott debate proved to be significant. The Sunday School Board concluded that discretion was the better part of valor, and quietly decided that Elliott's commentary would not be reissued after supplies from the initial printing were exhausted. Then in the fall of 1962, a committee of Midwestern Seminary trustees requested Elliott not to find another publisher. When he made arrangements for Bethany Press (Disciples of Christ) to publish *The Message of Genesis*, he was fired on the grounds of insubordination. Finally, the controversy precipitated the approval of the revised Baptist Faith and Message at the Kansas City Convention in 1963. The new BFM, largely the work of Herschel Hobbs, affirmed that the Bible was "truth without any mixture of error."¹¹ This doctrinal statement was clearly a response to conservative suspicions about the seminaries that had been voiced during the Elliott controversy.

⁷Ralph H. Elliott, *The Message of Genesis* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1961).

⁸*Ibid.*, 14–15.

⁹Ralph H. Elliott, *The "Genesis Controversy" and Continuity in Southern Baptist Chaos-A Eulogy for a Great Tradition* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1992), 7.

¹⁰For accounts of the Elliott controversy, see Fletcher, 205–10; and James C. Hefley, *The Conservative Resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention* (Hannibal, MO: Hannibal Books, 1991), 29–30.

¹¹Fletcher, 209–10; and Hefley, 30–32. See also Herschel Hobbs, *The Baptist Faith and Message* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1971), esp. 18.

For his part, Gray Allison expressed frustration that many of the issues surrounding Elliott's book had been "swept under the rug" at San Francisco, so later in 1962 he began meeting with his soul mate from NOBTS days, T. V. ("Corky") Farris. They talked and prayed about overall conditions in the SBC and the six seminaries.¹² Soon some close associates from the Allison Evangelistic Association, which was organized in 1960, joined these meetings. The primary purpose of these gatherings, which were usually held in the Allison home in Ruston, Louisiana, was not to organize a new theological school but to pray that a distinctively conservative seminary would be an option for Southern Baptists. In the published account of his annual Founders' Days address on the Mid-America story, Allison suggested that the agenda for these meetings was fairly limited: "We didn't have a formal organization, we didn't have called meetings, but when we got together we just talked . . . and prayed [about an alternative seminary]."¹³ Nevertheless, all the directors of the Evangelistic Association eventually participated in the prayer meetings. Allison also shared his burden with his brother, Philip, who was pastoring in New Jersey from 1964 to 1970. When Gray preached a revival in Baltimore, he invited Philip and Alta Mae Allison down and told them that he was now thinking about starting a new seminary. They were a bit skeptical, but Philip told his brother that he was willing to serve as a faculty member if the project came to fruition.¹⁴

In the meantime, conditions in the SBC did not dramatically improve. Neither the seminaries nor the Sunday School Board seemed very responsive to expressions of concern by conservatives. Indeed, a whole new crisis developed in 1969 with the publication of the first volume of the *Broadman Bible Commentary*. This volume included a section on Genesis written by G. Henton Davies, an English Baptist from Oxford.¹⁵ Davies, like Elliott before him, employed higher critical methods and reached predictable conclusions. He shocked SBC conservatives by questioning whether God ever commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac (Genesis 22).¹⁶ Following Elliott's neoorthodox approach, he generally argued that religious "truth" could be maintained apart from historical fact.

Debate about Davies's handling of Genesis reached the floor of the Denver Convention in 1970. Gwin Turner of California brought a motion asking that the first volume of the Broadman commentary be withdrawn and "rewritten with due consideration of the conservative viewpoint."¹⁷ Gray Allison had made plans to take his son to an air show on the day that the motion was to be presented. But Philip Allison

¹²B. Gray Allison interview.

¹³B. Gray Allison, "The Mid-America Story," *Mid-America Theological Journal* 16 (Spring 1992): 1.

¹⁴Philip and Alta Mae Allison, interview by author, 17 May 1996, tape recording and transcript, Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, Germantown, TN.

¹⁵G. Henton Davies, "Genesis," in *Broadman Bible Commentary*, vol. 1, ed. Clifton J. Allen (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1969), 101–304.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 198.

¹⁷Hefley, 35.

called his younger brother the night before and asked him to be there for the discussion of Turner's motion. As it turned out, Gray Allison joined in the floor debate:

I was sitting next to my brother Phil, and the people who were speaking against the commentary were not known. They were pastors of churches, but they were not known. I just turned to Phil and said, "Somebody who is known in this Convention ought to get up and speak against that thing," and it dawned on me that I was known. I had been on the state convention and state evangelism conference circuits for a number of years teaching Bible at these things and preaching and was pretty well known throughout the Convention, especially for my work with the Seminary in New Orleans and the Home Mission Board; so I got up and spoke two minutes against the commentary on Genesis.¹⁸

The Turner resolution passed by an overwhelming majority. At the 1971 Convention in St. Louis, a motion was approved to instruct the Sunday School Board that the Genesis commentary be redone by a different writer, and subsequently Clyde Francisco of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary was enlisted for the task.¹⁹

Gray Allison firmly believed that denominational officials had been less than honorable in their responses to the controversies involving Elliott and Davies. His experience at the 1970 Convention ratified his growing conviction that a new seminary was needed:

[I] came back home, and I really felt like we ought to begin a seminary. Voncille [his wife] has been my prayer partner all these years and was really an anchor for me, and she agreed that we probably ought to start a seminary, but she didn't think that was the time. We prayed a lot about it, and I prayed with some other friends.²⁰

The fact that some SBC agencies tolerated theological views that were not representative of most Southern Baptists weighed heavily on the Allison and their circle of friends. Most importantly, they viewed the Elliott and Davies commentaries as incompatible with biblical inerrancy, and they suspected that several faculty members at SBC seminaries would be in close proximity to the Elliott-Davies camp. Finally, the two debates over commentaries on Genesis directly stimulated both prayers and planning for a theological institution where neoorthodox ideas and higher critical methodologies would not be given a sympathetic hearing.

THE EMERGENCE OF AN ALTERNATIVE SEMINARY

Nineteen seventy-one proved to be a crucial year for SBC conservatives who were dissatisfied with the theological climate in the Cooperative Program seminaries. First

¹⁸B. Gray Allison interview. Allison served the Home Mission Board in 1966–67 as Associate Director for the Division of Evangelism.

¹⁹Hefley, 35. For another account of the Broadman controversy, see Fletcher, 237–39.

²⁰B. Gray Allison interview.

Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas, established the Criswell Center for Biblical Studies, which was named for their longtime pastor, W. A. Criswell.²¹ That same year, Gray Allison determined that the time was ripe to put some feet on the many prayers that had been offered up for almost a decade. After consulting with the directors of his Evangelistic Association and receiving their blessing, Allison began to organize “The School of the Prophets” in Ruston during the summer of 1971, with the aim of starting classes in 1972.²²

Sensing that the new school might cause serious misunderstandings among Southern Baptists, Allison resolved to visit the presidents of the six SBC seminaries, as well as the heads of other SBC agencies. His purpose was to explain to these SBC officials, all of whom he knew, his reasons for starting “The School of the Prophets” and to tell them “we are not fighting anybody except Satan or anything but sin.” He also wanted to stress that the new seminary was designed “to meet what we believed was a real need in our Convention life.”²³ Thus, in the very early stages of organization, Allison attempted to balance what he saw as an urgent need for an alternative seminary with an intense desire to maintain congenial ties with SBC officialdom.

During the fall of 1971, Allison traveled to the seminary campuses and agency headquarters. His itinerary included meetings with Grady Cothen of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, Robert Naylor of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Duke McCall of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Olin Binkley of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Millard Berquist of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Harold Graves of Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary, Arthur Rutledge of the Home Mission Board, James Sullivan of the Baptist Sunday School Board, and Baker Cauthen of the Foreign Mission Board. For some of the visits he took associates along; his brother Philip accompanied him to see Cothen, T. V. Farris went along on the visit to Naylor, and LaVerne Butler, a pastor in Louisville, joined him in the session with McCall. Some of the men responded kindly and graciously, while others were concerned that the new school would split the SBC or detract from the Cooperative Program. All of them agreed that Allison had the right to start a seminary, but it would become increasingly apparent that many of them would do all they could to hinder his efforts. Institutional interests clearly were at stake; hence, it is not surprising that some of these leaders betrayed a marked defensiveness.²⁴

Finally, Gray Allison traveled to a friendlier environment, paying a “courtesy call” to W. A. Criswell in Dallas to inform the conservative patriarch and recent SBC president (1968-70) of developments in Louisiana. Since Criswell had a one-week “School of the Prophets” at First Baptist, Allison sought his permission to use that name for the new seminary. Criswell was very cordial, saw no problem with the name, and gave his blessing to Allison and the fledgling theological institution.²⁵ The venerable

²¹See Hefley, 35; and Fletcher, 241–42.

²²B. Gray Allison interview.

²³Ibid.

²⁴See *ibid.* for Allison’s account of his visits.

²⁵Ibid.

preacher's endorsement, along with the counsel and support of pastors like Adrian Rogers, then at First Baptist Church of Merritt Island, Florida, served to counterbalance the suspicion and even hostility of some in the SBC.

From September of 1971 to January of 1972, a letter from Allison announcing the new school was mailed to 34,000 SBC pastors. In this letter Allison introduced himself by providing information about his conversion, call to the ministry, and career in Christian work. He emphasized that he was a Southern Baptist "by conviction and choice," and a "firm believer in, and supporter of the Cooperative Program." Then he moved to the main point of his letter:

I have a deep-seated conviction that there is a need for another seminary which is through and through conservative in its theological stance, where every professor believes in the verbal inspiration of the Bible.²⁶

He also voiced his conviction that those preparing for the ministry should take more hours in evangelism and missions than were required in most existing schools. The letter included his personal pledge that: (1) faculty would meet certain practical, theological, and educational expectations; (2) academic standards would be maintained; (3) students would be required to witness; and (4) financial support would be sought from churches and individual church members. Allison also noted that he had visited the SBC seminary presidents and agency leaders. The letter then projected an August 1972 opening of "The School of the Prophets" in Ruston, with Gray Allison as President and Professor of Church History and Evangelism. In order to protect the rest of the faculty from possible job recriminations, it was added that "other professors are committed and will be announced later." In conclusion, Allison listed needs relating to prayer, money, and students; he also included a tear-off response section.²⁷ The letter unmistakably sounded two principal themes. "The School of the Prophets" would be thoroughly Southern Baptist in its ethos, but with some fundamental differences from already existing institutions.

While many welcomed the prospect of a more conservative alternative to the six SBC seminaries, it became apparent that other Southern Baptists were horrified by what Gray Allison had outlined in his letter. A vivid example of the early antagonism expressed toward "The School of the Prophets" was found in the "Letters" section of the *Arkansas Baptist* late in 1971. Lewis Rhodes of Knoxville, Tennessee, vented his misgivings about a seminary committed to verbal inspiration and evangelism. He evidently feared "a revival of the type of fundamentalism rejected by George W. Truett, Louie D. Newton, and the Southern Baptist Convention." Toward the end of his letter, Rhodes fretted that a successful new seminary would channel money away from "Southern Baptist programs," presumably meaning the Cooperative Program. He also warned that graduates of the new school would divide Southern Baptist churches: "I see unhappy pastors, with unhappy churches, unhappily related to Southern Baptists."²⁸ It is

²⁶Allison promotional letter.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Lewis E. Rhodes, "School of the Prophets," *Arkansas Baptist*, 2 December 1971, 5.

difficult to judge whether Rhodes was aspiring to be a prophet or simply a stubborn defender of the denominational status quo.

Ironically, the founders of “The School of the Prophets” saw themselves as loyal Southern Baptists who wanted a Southern Baptist institution. For many years the MABTS *Catalog* carried the following statement regarding the school’s relationship with the SBC:

The Seminary is neither owned nor controlled by, nor has any formal affiliation with, the Southern Baptist Convention. However, Mid-America is committed to the Southern Baptist doctrinal beliefs. The Seminary is committed to the Cooperative Program and does not seek to take away from the Program but actively seeks to support it. The Seminary is committed to Southern Baptist churches, and the scholastic program and curriculum are geared directly to Southern Baptist churches and missions. Each member of the faculty and each member of the Board of Trustees is an active Southern Baptist. Mid-America Seminary is committed to Southern Baptist missions and evangelism. This is the emphasis of the entire school.²⁹

This approach, which has guided Mid-America from the beginning, apparently failed to convince critics who viewed the launching of a new school outside of the Cooperative Program umbrella as an ominous development. In fact, MABTS would struggle for years to gain acceptance as a legitimately Southern Baptist work, with mixed results.

Nevertheless, President Allison set a tone very early in the Seminary’s history by refusing to engage in pointless conflict with opponents. The impact of his positive attitude and spirit was aptly gauged by Howard Bickers when Mid-America observed its twentieth anniversary. The then Vice-President for Academic Affairs wrote:

The Seminary prohibits any negative criticism of any Southern Baptist agency, leader, or program by speakers in the classrooms and in the chapel services. The leaders of the Seminary believe that the institution best fulfills its purpose when a Christlike spirit and a stance of positive support are engendered. Consequently, the energies of the Seminary are focused upon the training of students rather than upon participation in divisive issues within the Convention.³⁰

While this statement obviously encompasses SBC trends since 1979, it also highlights a denominational posture that has endured at MABTS since its founding. Bickers cited additional examples of the Seminary’s constructive relationship with the SBC that would not have been evident to skeptical detractors in the early 1970s: the high percentage of Southern Baptist students and alumni; the Lottie Moon and Annie Armstrong offerings that have been taken regularly at the school; and the fact that Mid-America dismisses

²⁹For example, see MABTS *Catalog* 25–26 (1996–1998): 9. For some reason this statement does not appear in more recent catalogs.

³⁰Howard B. Bickers Jr., “The Uniqueness of Mid-America,” *Mid-America Theological Journal* 16 (Spring 1992): 46.

classes during the week when the Convention meets.³¹ Through the years, MABTS has consistently set forth a supportive and cooperative denominational policy, even under conditions of heavy fire from some SBC officials who did not understand it.

After the founders settled philosophical questions about mission, direction, and denominational ties, other more practical matters fell in place for the opening of the new school in 1972. Early in the year Gray Allison proposed and the Trustees officially approved a name change from “The School of the Prophets” to Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary. This was followed by a change in venue from Ruston, Louisiana, so that by August the first Founders’ Days and the launching of classes took place in the facilities of Olivet Baptist Church in Little Rock, Arkansas.

Although MABTS candidly publicized itself as an alternative seminary, a distinctly New Orleans flavor permeated the first faculty and curricula. Three of the original faculty--Gray Allison, Philip Allison, and T. V. Farris--held Doctor of Theology degrees from New Orleans Seminary. The fourth, Roy Beaman, earned his doctorate at Southern Seminary but had taught for over twenty years at New Orleans.³²

Similarly, several details of the academic structure and programs mirrored NOBTS, including the calendar, degrees offered, the practical ministry program, and the interest in training those who had not attended or completed college. At the same time, Mid-America introduced some curricular features that helped to set it apart, as Gray Allison noted in an interview: “We required a course in the Holy Spirit and a course in the cults, required more missions and evangelism and theology than the other schools.”³³ The Greek and Hebrew requirements likewise stood in contrast to some other institutions, where the biblical languages were optional.³⁴ In addition, the strong evangelistic focus of the Practical Missions program and Report Hour shaped a unique ethos at Mid-America that was not really duplicated anywhere else.³⁵

THE CONTINUING STRUGGLE FOR ACCEPTANCE IN THE SBC

Dramatic growth in the student body (from 28 to 153) meant an expanded faculty and increased budgets during the three years in Little Rock. In fact, a major logistical problem emerged as MABTS became too large to be housed at Olivet Baptist.³⁶ Eventually the young seminary moved to Memphis, Tennessee, first occupying part of Bellevue Baptist Church and then the former Temple Israel facility across the street from Bellevue. The efforts of Bellevue’s pastor, Adrian Rogers, and several faithful donors made it possible for Mid-America to purchase the Reform Jewish complex and move in debt-free in December of 1976.³⁷ During the two decades in Memphis, the Seminary (1)

³¹Ibid., 45–46.

³²For additional material on the early faculty, see Patterson, 35–37.

³³B. Gray Allison interview.

³⁴For curricular details, see MABTS *Bulletin* 1 (1972–1973): 11–14.

³⁵Ibid., 8.

³⁶On the Little Rock years, see Patterson, 40–51.

³⁷Ibid., 54–60.

saw enrollment push over the 400 mark; (2) added several new professors so that the number of full-time faculty averaged 20; (3) purchased adjoining properties for a library and administration building (1981-84); (4) attained full accreditation with the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (1982); and (5) established a branch campus in the Capital District of New York State, where a debt-free building opened in 1989.³⁸

The Seminary's relocation to Memphis and continued growth did not immediately produce a better relationship with Southern Baptist leadership, whether at associational, state, or national levels. Even before classes began in Memphis in 1975, an article by religion editor Beth J. Tamke in the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* reported that "local pastors have been concerned over the possibility of the "independent-minded" students filling local pulpits and possibly leading local congregations out of the denomination." She also noted that SBC President Jaroy Weber was scheduled to be a speaker at Founders' Days later in the month, but that he would probably cancel the appearance because of a conflict "and because he does not want to bring any embarrassment to the denomination or his office." (Weber indeed canceled). The column went on in a more favorable manner to recount interviews with Gray and Philip Allison, and to quote three area pastors who were supportive of MABTS. The headline and earlier paragraphs, however, did not make the Seminary's task of explaining its denominational posture any easier.³⁹

In May of 1977 the Shelby Baptist Association passed a resolution affirming the six Cooperative Program seminaries for their "faithfulness to God's Word, integrity in Biblical interpretation, and commitment to the Bible as the Word of God."⁴⁰ Some interpreters of this action believed that it was in response to the Staley Lectures that were given at Mid-America in April of the same year by Harold Lindsell, then the editor of *Christianity Today*. Lindsell had made a statement, similar to what he argued in *The Battle for the Bible*, that all six official SBC seminaries had professors who did not believe the entire Bible.⁴¹ This local reaction further complicated Mid-America's efforts to communicate a positive denominational loyalty. At the same time, it indicated that many in the SBC still had not caught on to the magnitude of the problems in some of their seminaries.

Later in 1977 MABTS received some improved press coverage in the *Illinois Baptist*. John Whiteman wrote an article based on an interview with Professor Jimmy Millikin, who was speaking in the state at the Nine Mile associational meeting. While Whiteman certainly was not an enthusiastic promoter of the Seminary, he knew that some Mid-America graduates were seeking pastorates in Illinois and that many Southern Baptists in the state were not familiar with the school. Millikin, the first addition to the

³⁸On enrollment, faculty, accreditation, and new properties, see *ibid.*, 61–92 and 100. On the Northeast Branch, see *ibid.*, 104–116.

³⁹See Beth J. Tamke, "Independent Seminary Stirs Concern," (*Memphis Commercial Appeal*, 2 August 1975, 12.

⁴⁰"Shelby Action Praises All SBC Seminaries," *Baptist & Reflector*, 14–15 April 1977, 12.

⁴¹For an announcement of the Staley Lectures, see the *Mid-America Messenger* 5 (February 1977): 1–2. See also Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 89–105 for criticism of the SBC.

original faculty, emphasized that all professors at MABTS held to conservative views on biblical inspiration and authority; he then observed “there are people in other SBC seminaries with divergent views on the inspiration of the Scriptures.”⁴² Whiteman’s piece was no ringing endorsement, but it was one of the fairest and most balanced treatments to have appeared in a Baptist state paper to that point.

During the twenty-one years that Mid-America was in midtown Memphis, denominational relations gradually improved. A great boost for the Seminary was its close relationship with a large, local SBC congregation, Bellevue Baptist, which continued even after the church moved to suburban Cordova late in 1989. Over the years Bellevue has provided temporary facilities, significant financial support, opportunities for students to gain practical experience as “workshippers,” other benefits like banquets and shopping sprees, and land across the street from the present church site for a new MABTS campus that is scheduled to open in 2006. On a larger scale, Bellevue also sent a message that Mid-America had a strong ally in the SBC that could vouch for the school’s integrity as genuinely Southern Baptist.⁴³

In the meantime, SBC conservatives like Paige Patterson, then President of the Criswell Center in Dallas, and Judge Paul Pressler of Houston, concluded that simply passing resolutions at the SBC’s annual gatherings had not yielded significant change in the seminaries and other agencies. They developed a strategy aimed at electing a succession of conservative presidents who, in turn, would appoint conservative trustees to the various SBC boards. The hope was that this plan eventually would direct the denomination down a more conservative path; in particular, conservatives desired a clear message regarding the full authority and inerrancy of the Bible. The conservative line of action initially focused on the Convention of 1979, which was held in Houston. Catching the moderates off guard, conservatives succeeded in electing Adrian Rogers, Bellevue’s pastor, as President. This launched what conservatives called a “resurgence” and moderates attacked as a “takeover.”⁴⁴

The election of Adrian Rogers as SBC President underlined the significance of Mid-America’s relationship with Bellevue Baptist. When he met with Baptist state paper editors, they asked him about his support of Mid-America, although few were probably aware that he had delivered the Staley Lectures at the Seminary in February of 1979. Rogers explained to them why he would continue his friendship with MABTS:

⁴²John Whiteman, “Mid-America Baptist Seminary: Is It a Southern Baptist School?” *Illinois Baptist*, 5 October 1977, 7.

⁴³For insight on the MABTS-Bellevue connection, see Rogers interview; and interview with Eugene Howard by the author, 30 May 1996, tape recording and transcript, Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, Germantown, TN. Howard is a Bellevue deacon and has served as Chairman of the MABTS Board of Trustees. On the new campus, see “The New Campus,” *Messenger* 33 (Winter 2004): 5; B. Gray Allison, “The Miracle Continues,” *Messenger* 33 (Winter 2004): 12.

⁴⁴On the Patterson-Pressler strategy, see Fletcher, 248ff.; and Hefley, 32–33 and 36–41. For full accounts of the conservative-moderate controversy, see David T. Morgan, *The New Crusades, the New Holy Land: Conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention, 1969–1991* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1996); and Jerry Sutton, *The Baptist Reformation: The Conservative Resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000). Pressler tells his story in *A Hill to On Which to Die: One Southern Baptist’s Journey* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999).

Because I believe in Mid-America Seminary, and they are friends of mine, and I would not have much character if an election would change my friends. My friends are my friends. I believe these people.

He then added that Mid-America was a “monument to the failure of our present seminaries to stand up for the inerrancy of the Word of God.”⁴⁵ Although it was not entirely clear at that time, the events in Houston marked the beginning of a new day in the SBC and for MABTS’s standing in the denomination.

The conservatives worked their game plan masterfully from 1979 to the early 1990s, when their victory appeared to be decisive. During that time, a battle for the soul of the denomination took place; it has been dubbed as “the Controversy” and “a Holy War.”⁴⁶ Labels for combatants often were confusing, as moderates preferred to brand conservatives as “fundamentalists” and conservatives suspected that some in the moderate camp were, in reality, liberals. One of the most helpful designations was offered by R. Albert Mohler Jr. The current Southern Baptist Seminary President suggested that the SBC conflict was between two competing factions: (1) a “liberty party” that emphasizes religious freedom, soul competency, and the priesthood of all believers, but resists specific doctrinal parameters; and (2) a “truth party” that “defines Baptist identity in terms of continuity with the conservative theological traditions that shaped and sustained the Southern Baptist Convention, relatively unthreatened, from its birth until the middle of the twentieth century.”⁴⁷ Given the circumstances of Mid-America’s founding, there was no doubt with which party the Seminary identified.

As the SBC controversy intensified by the mid-1980s, the Convention established a Peace Committee to ascertain why the conflict started and what might be done to resolve it. The Committee included some supporters of MABTS like Adrian Rogers and Jerry Vines. At the St. Louis Convention in 1987, messengers adopted the Peace Committee report, which used the following criteria to measure the orthodoxy of what was believed in the SBC agencies and taught in the seminaries: (1) the reality of biblical miracles; (2) the reliability of stated authorship in books of the Bible; (3) the historical accuracy of Scripture; and (4) the historicity of biblical characters such as Adam and the patriarchs. The Committee found problems at some of the schools and agencies, vindicating what Gray Allison and others had been saying for many years. In addition, the Committee concluded that the controversy, while it had some political causes, was primarily theological; in other words, it centered on “the extent and nature of [biblical] authority.”⁴⁸ Conservatives understandably viewed the Committee Report as a major victory. They continued to win the presidential elections, with the result that all the agency and seminary boards had conservative majorities by the early 1990s.

⁴⁵Rogers interview.

⁴⁶For example, see Joe D. Barnhart, *The Southern Baptist Holy War* (Austin: Texas Monthly Press, 1986).

⁴⁷R. Albert Mohler Jr., “A Call for Baptist Evangelicals and Evangelical Baptists: Communities of Faith and a Common Quest for Identity,” in *Southern Baptists and American Evangelicals: The Conversation Continues*, ed. David S. Dockery (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 227–28.

⁴⁸On the Peace Committee, see Fletcher, 284–85 and 287–88; and Hefley, 53 and 57.

Consequently, conservative presidents were elected at most SBC institutions.⁴⁹ Many moderates sensed where the SBC was heading and set up advocacy organizations like the Southern Baptist Alliance and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.⁵⁰

Mid-America's pronounced sympathy for the conservative cause in the SBC did not translate into direct political activity by President Allison, trustees, or faculty members. In 1981, two years after the election of Adrian Rogers at Houston, Allison enunciated the Seminary's stance: "We at Mid-America have not been, and do not intend to be, engaged in fighting with others." He then reiterated the school's policy of only hiring professors who believed the Bible and were consistent witnesses.⁵¹ His approach to the controversy was reaffirmed by then Trustee Chairman Roland Maddox in a letter that was mailed to MABTS supporters in 1990:

As an institution, we have stayed out of the political battle. It has been and remains our policy that we do not criticize the Convention or its agencies and boards, nor do we allow guest speakers to do so from our platform. Our Trustees, Faculty, and Staff members have participated as loyal Southern Baptists who love their denomination and are committed to seeing it stay true to God's Word. Our students are trained and encouraged to support the work of our Convention.⁵²

In fact, Gray Allison once interrupted a chapel speaker who was criticizing Southern Baptists; he told the guest, "Brother, we don't criticize the Southern Baptist Convention from this pulpit."⁵³

At the same time, the Seminary understood quite well what was at stake in the SBC conflict. Early in 1988 President Allison made one of his few public comments about it:

It is a controversy over a real issue. That issue is the Word of God. If one's view of Scripture is not correct, missions and evangelism will go by the way. No man will long preach with conviction and urgency about the lostness of people and their need of a Saviour unless he is committed to the truth of the Word of God. It is my personal belief that Southern Baptists must settle this issue once for all, or we will never get on with the great task which is ours. I don't believe the controversy is what is hurting evangelism. It has been my experience in almost 39 years as a Southern Baptist preacher that very little evangelism occurs when there is not a strong emphasis on the truth of the Word of God and the necessity that we obey it in all things.⁵⁴

⁴⁹Fletcher, esp. chap. 9; and Hefley, esp. chap. 17.

⁵⁰Fletcher, 291–92, 318, and 322–24; and Hefley, 332ff.

⁵¹B. Gray Allison, "Words from the President," *Messenger* 9 (July 1981): 2.

⁵²Roland Maddox, letter from Memphis, TN, to MABTS supporters, 9 November 1990.

⁵³B. Gray Allison interview. This incident has been verified by several at Mid-America who witnessed it.

⁵⁴B. Gray Allison, "Words from the President," *Messenger* 16 (February 1988): 2.

As an alternative seminary seeking credibility in the SBC, Mid-America was careful not to be a direct participant in the Convention dispute; however, the Seminary's uncompromising stand for inerrancy, which predated the actual controversy, closely matched the conservative position. Further, MABTS's commitment to missions and evangelism stood as a vivid rebuttal to the moderate claims that insistence on specific doctrinal standards threatened to undercut those causes.

BREAKTHROUGHS IN THE SBC

Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, regarded by many of the SBC old guard as a renegade institution, realized certain benefits from the conservative resurgence. Chapel appearances by SBC presidents and agency heads became more common.⁵⁵ In 1987 the Foreign Mission Board dropped its requirement that appointees who graduated from schools like Mid-America attend a Cooperative Program seminary for a year, contributing to an upsurge of MABTS alumni receiving FMB/IMB appointments.⁵⁶ In 1995 Carey Bates, a Mid-America alumnus and Candidate Consultant for the FMB/IMB, reported that MABTS ranked third in appointments “among all seminaries (Southern Baptist Convention and non-SBC affiliated) whose graduates were appointed.”⁵⁷ Other signs of a changed denominational relationship include: groups from the FMB/IMB, the HMB/NAMB, and the BSSB/Lifeway Christian Resources visiting the campus to present their work, sometimes for a week at a time⁵⁸; Gray Allison presenting a paper at the SBC Historical Commission, which was later published in *Baptist History and Heritage*⁵⁹; the President likewise doing a theme interpretation at the Las Vegas Convention the same year⁶⁰; and the Annuity Board accepting MABTS employees into its retirement program.⁶¹ All of this would have been unthinkable in 1972, let alone 1982. The growing stature of Mid-America in Southern Baptist life led the moderate periodical, *Baptists Today*, to speculate wrongly in early 1992 that the Seminary would come under the Cooperative Program umbrella as a “satellite” of Southeastern Seminary. This piece, run under “Politics & Corridor Talk,” contained many factual errors, which provoked a response from MABTS and forced a correction in a later issue.⁶² Some insiders contend that an overture from the SBC was made to MABTS involving a possible relationship to

⁵⁵The author witnessed this as a Mid-America faculty member from 1989–1999.

⁵⁶“Foreign Board Revises Requirements for Appointment,” *Messenger* 15 (April 1987): Special Supplement.

⁵⁷Carey Bates, “Mid-America Ranks Third in Foreign Mission Board Appointments,” *Messenger* 23 (Winter 1995): 1.

⁵⁸Observed by the author.

⁵⁹B. Gray Allison, “Notable Achievements in Missions and Evangelism since 1845,” *Baptist History and Heritage* 24 (July 1989): 32–39.

⁶⁰B. Gray Allison interview.

⁶¹The author was a participant in this program.

⁶²See “Major Changes at Southeastern?,” *Baptists Today*, 6 February 1992, 7; and “Correction on Mid-America,” *Baptists Today*, 5 March 1992, 7.

the Cooperative Program, although details remain sketchy.⁶³ If an approach from the SBC transpired, Mid-America evidently believed that a continuing status as an “alternative” seminary still held advantages, despite the seismic changes in SBC denominational life since 1979.

By the time MABTS moved from midtown Memphis into the former facilities of Germantown Baptist Church in early 1996, its respectability and standing in the SBC seemed secure. In September of 1996 Tom Elliff, President of the SBC and a D.Min. student at Mid-America, came to campus to lead a spiritual awakening convocation. Over 900 people in the MABTS auditorium heard Elliff and Avery Willis, FMB Vice President, emphasize the crucified life and prayer as the keys to revival in the SBC and in the nation.⁶⁴ Convocations were held at Mid-America and the six Cooperative Program seminaries, a further measure of just how far the Seminary had traveled since 1972 in its relationship with the denomination. Confirmation of this came with many letters from SBC officials concerning both the 25th anniversary of the school and the retirement of Gray Allison as President in 1997.⁶⁵ Finally, the picture cited in the introduction to this essay further testified to the acceptance of Mid-America at the highest levels of the SBC.

CONCLUSION

As an alternative seminary that chose to remain indirectly aligned with the SBC, Mid-America carved a unique niche in denominational life as a theological institution committed unswervingly to the inerrancy of Scripture, missions, and evangelism. Whereas the SBC has moved since 1979 to reiterate these agendas, they have been an essential and consistent part of Mid-America’s identity since 1972. In assessing the impact of MABTS on the broader denomination, several points can be made.

First, the founding and early growth of the Seminary was, as Suzanne Allison Grigsby puts it, a “wake up call” to the rest of the SBC.⁶⁶ In other words, the very existence of Mid-America as an alternate choice for Southern Baptists sent a message that all was not well with the Cooperative Program seminaries and that noticeable doctrinal drift had occurred in the Convention. This message was not always well received because the Seminary was conservative before it was popular to be conservative; Gray Allison and many of the early faculty and supporters clearly paid a price for this. In the long run, however, the launching of MABTS proved to be a prelude to what developed in the SBC beginning with the election of Adrian Rogers in 1979.

⁶³The author heard variations on this theme from a few sources while teaching at MABTS, but was not able to verify whether an overture had been made.

⁶⁴“SBC President Leads Convocation at Mid-America,” *Messenger* 25 (Fall 1996): 1. MABTS will be moving again since its Germantown campus has been purchased by a neighboring hospital.

⁶⁵For example, see Morris H. Chapman, President of the Executive Committee of the SBC, letter from Nashville, TN, to B. Gray Allison, 18 March 1997; and James T. Draper Jr., President of the Sunday School Board, letter from Nashville, TN, to “Friends” at MABTS, 4 March 1997. The author possesses Xerox copies of these letters.

⁶⁶Voncille Allison and Suzanne Allison Grigsby, interview by author, 1 August 1996, tape recording and transcript, Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, Germantown, TN. Suzanne Grigsby is Gray Allison’s oldest daughter.

Second, Mid-America graduates influenced churches and associations, particularly as many of them emphasized evangelism, church growth, and support for foreign missions. Over a period of time, individuals and churches in the SBC realized that most Mid-America alumni were loyal Southern Baptists who were intent on nurturing their denominational connections. For years, those preparing to receive their degrees at the Seminary were exhorted by various faculty members at graduation luncheons to work cooperatively with other Southern Baptist pastors, directors of missions, and denominational officials.⁶⁷ Some suspicions certainly lingered and not all graduates displayed a positive spirit, but gradually many barriers collapsed.

Third, the Seminary realized an impact in the SBC through alumni and former faculty members who gained notable leadership positions elsewhere. Thad Hamilton has served in the Evangelism Department of the North American Mission Board, Tom Strode works in Washington for the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, Jack Kwok is the Executive Director of the State Convention of Baptists in Ohio, Archie England teaches at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, and Hershael York has served as a professor at Southern Seminary as well as president of the Kentucky Baptist Convention. Alumni also have landed teaching positions at colleges sponsored by Baptist state conventions: Curtis McClain at Missouri Baptist College, Chris Morgan at California Baptist University, Chuck Quarles at Louisiana College, and Doug Wilson and Jay Robertson at the University of Mobile. In addition, alumnus Ed Harrison was elected as Second Vice President of the SBC in 1991. Former MABTS professors and administrators also have moved on to important positions in SBC life. John Floyd directed Southern Baptist work in Central and Eastern Europe for the IMB before returning to Mid-America in 1999, Richard Melick was provost at Golden Gate Seminary, Tom Nettles teaches at Southern Seminary, Sam Simmons directed Golden Gate's branch campus in the Los Angeles area, Berry Driver is Director of Libraries at Southwestern Seminary, Don Dunavant recently assumed administrative and teaching duties at California Baptist, and this author is a professor at Union University. Floyd, Simmons, Driver, and Dunavant are MABTS alumni as well.⁶⁸

Fourth, Mid-America helped to give credibility to the conservative movement in the SBC. In an interview, Adrian Rogers suggested this dimension of the Seminary's influence:

The Seminary is not a diploma mill. The professors in the Seminary are noted scholars, with good track records and theological and academic pedigrees; and that shut the mouths of the gainsayers to say "These are a lot of country bumpkins who really have no theological background, acumen"; and that's one thing. It gave us a certain status and a certain respectability.⁶⁹

Even as detractors tried to picture MABTS as a third-rate Bible school with little academic credibility, supporters knew better. Increasingly SBC conservatives not only recommended the Seminary but drew on its intellectual and spiritual resources.

⁶⁷The author was in attendance at 20 of these luncheons from 1989–1999.

⁶⁸This list was compiled from alumni notices in the MABTS *Messenger*, conversations at MABTS, and personal knowledge of the individuals.

⁶⁹Rogers interview.

Fifth, MABTS in some ways provided for the Convention seminaries a “model” or “yardstick.”⁷⁰ As the SBC moved in a more conservative direction, and trustees began the process of turning around schools like Southeastern and Southern, Mid-America exercised an inevitable influence as a seminary that had been intentionally and consistently conservative from its origins; thus it represented an alternative pattern for theological education that was attractive to leaders of the conservative resurgence. At the very least, MABTS served as a measuring rod to demonstrate just how far some of the other schools had drifted. More specifically, Mid-America’s emphases on inerrancy, missions, and evangelism have become more central to the institutional purposes of the Cooperative Program seminaries. In a chapel address at the end of the Seminary’s 25th academic year, Morris Chapman, President of the SBC Executive Committee, publicly acknowledged the contributions of Gray Allison and Mid-America to the renewal of Southern Baptist theological education.⁷¹

Finally, Mid-America might have contributed unintentionally to the upsurge of new theological education options for Southern Baptists in the 1990s. As the moderate cause waned and the Cooperative Program seminaries became more conservative, several Baptist colleges and universities opened divinity schools as alternatives to the national SBC institutions. In addition to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship-approved Baptist Theological Seminary of Richmond, schools like Baylor, Campbell, Gardner-Webb, Mercer, and Wake Forest offered theological programs especially for those who had become alienated from the mainstream of the SBC.⁷² MABTS’s influence on this trend was at best indirect; the Seminary established a pattern for alternative theological education in the 1970s, but under very different conditions. Further, Mid-America expressed a much stronger denominational loyalty than can be found at BTR or the new divinity schools.

For the future, it remains to be seen whether Mid-America can continue to maintain a distinctive identity in light of the changes at Cooperative Program schools; perhaps its prospects will be analogous to those of the third parties in American politics that found their platforms absorbed by one of the major parties. Hence, some might go so far as to suggest that the school has fulfilled its function as an alternative seminary and may have difficulties setting itself apart from the other SBC seminaries since it is no longer in an adversarial relationship with them. Certainly Mid-America faces questions about its direction and role in the SBC in the early twenty-first century, especially with the passing of strong supporters like Adrian Rogers. Nonetheless, the MABTS story truly represents an unusual and unique chapter in the history of theological education, not only in the SBC but also in the broader circles of American Protestantism.

⁷⁰See Howard interview; and Robert Pitman, interview by author, 2 May 1996, tape recording and transcript, Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, Germantown, TN. Pitman, who pastored Kirby Woods Baptist Church near MABTS, was among the first students when the Seminary started, and did Ph.D. work at the school.

⁷¹Morris H. Chapman, chapel message, Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, 1 May 1997. Tape recording at MABTS Library, Germantown, TN.

⁷²On the newer schools, see Fletcher, 319–20, 368–69, and 380.

James Patterson is Professor and Associate Dean, School of Christian Studies at Union University in Jackson, Tennessee. He taught for ten years at Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary and wrote the school's twenty-five year history, *To All the World*. He also has written *Shining Lights*, the twenty-five year history of the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities, published by Baker Books in 2001.