



# Address to the Public

*The founding document of Cooperative Baptist Fellowship*



*The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship is a group of moderate Southern Baptists and ex-Southern Baptists. Born in August 1990, as a result of the fundamentalist-moderate controversy within the Southern Baptist Convention (1979-1990), it did not adopt the name “Cooperative Baptist Fellowship” until May 10, 1991, and after the adoption of the following document. Because the name of the organization originally proposed was the “United Baptist Fellowship,” that was the term used in this document when presented to the Assembly. It has been replaced here by “Cooperative Baptist Fellowship,” the name ultimately adopted for the organization.*

*Presented to the General Assembly as “information” on behalf of the “Interim Steering Committee,” the document is the result of the work of two people, Cecil E. Sherman and Walter B. Shurden. Sherman’s is the primary hand. A brief history of the document is found in the archives of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship at Mercer University in Macon, Georgia.*

*Designed primarily to distinguish moderate Southern Baptists from fundamentalist Southern Baptists, “An Address to the Public” gives insight into what moderate Southern Baptists believe to be consistent with the Baptist tradition of freedom and responsibility. After providing a cursory background to the fundamentalist-moderate controversy, the document lists some of the major issues in the conflict. It then commits moderates to the building of a new organization that will embody Baptists principles and extend the missionary work of their people<sup>1</sup>.*

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<sup>1</sup> Shurden, Walter B. *The struggle for the Soul of the SBC*, Mercer University Press, Macon, GA 1993. P. 309 (Used by permission from Dr. Shurden)

## “An Address to the Public” from the Interim Steering Committee of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship Adopted on May 9, 1991

### Introduction

Forming something as fragile as the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship is not a move we make lightly. We are obligated to give some explanation for why we are doing what we are doing. Our children will know what we have done; they may not know why we have done what we have done. We have reasons for our actions. They are:

#### **I. Our Reasons Are Larger Than Losing.**

For twelve years the Southern Baptist Convention in annual session has voted to sustain the people who lead the

fundamentalist wing of the SBC. For twelve years the SBC in annual session has endorsed the arguments and the rationale of the fundamentalists. What has happened is not a quirk or a flash or an accident. It has been done again and again.

If inclined, one could conclude that the losers have tired of losing. But the formation of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship does not spring from petty rivalry. If the old moderate wing of the SBC were represented in making policy and were treated as welcomed representatives of competing ideas in the Baptist mission task, then we would co-exist, as we did for years, alongside fundamentalism and continue to argue our ideas before Southern Baptists.

But this is not the way things are. When fundamentalists won in 1979, they immediately began a policy of exclusion. Non-fundamentalists are not appointed to any denominational positions. Rarely are gentle fundamentalists appointed. Usually only doctrinaire fundamentalists, hostile to the purposes of the very institutions they control, are rewarded for service by appointment. Thus, the boards of SBC agencies are filled by only one kind of Baptists. And this is true whether the vote to elect was 60-40 or 52-48. It has been since 1979 a “winner take all.” We have no voice.

In another day Pilgrims and Quakers and Baptists came

to America for the same reason. As a minority, they had no way to get a hearing. They found a place where they would not be second-class citizens. All who attended the annual meeting of the SBC in New Orleans in June of 1990 will have an enlarged understanding of why our ancestors left their homes and dear ones and all that was familiar. So forming the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship is not something we do lightly. Being Baptist should ensure that no one is ever excluded who confesses, “Jesus is Lord (Philippians 2:11)”

## II. Our Understandings Are Different.

Occasionally, someone accuses Baptists of being merely a contentious, controversial people. That may be. But the ideas that divide Baptists in the present “controversy” are the same ideas that have divided Presbyterians, Lutherans, and Episcopalians. These ideas are strong and central; these ideas will not be papered over. Here are some of these basic ideas:

### 1. Bible.

Many of our differences come from a different understanding and interpretation of Holy Scripture. But the difference is not at the point of the inspiration or authority

of the Bible. We interpret the Bible differently, as will be seen below in our treatment of the biblical understanding of women and pastors. We also, however, have a different understanding of the nature of the Bible. We want to be biblical — especially in our view of the Bible. That means that we dare not claim less for the Bible than the Bible claims for itself. The Bible neither claims nor reveals inerrancy as a Christian teaching. Bible claims must be based on the Bible, not on human interpretations of the Bible.

### 2. Education.

What should happen in colleges and seminaries is a major bone of contention between fundamentalists and moderates. Fundamentalists educate by indoctrination. They have the truth and all the truth. As they see it, their job is to pass along the truth they have. They must not change it. They are certain that their understandings of the truth are correct, complete and to be adopted by others.

Moderates, too, are concerned with truth, but we do not claim a monopoly. We seek to enlarge and build upon such truth as we have. The task of education is to take the past and review it, even criticize it. We work to give our children a larger understanding of spiritual and physical reality. We

know we will always live in faith; our understandings will not be complete until we get to heaven and are loosed from the limitations of our mortality and sin.

### 3. Mission.

What ought to be the task of the missionary is another difference between us. We think the mission task is to reach people for faith in Jesus Christ by preaching, teaching, healing and other ministries of mercy and justice. We believe this to be the model of Jesus in Galilee. That is the way he went about his mission task. Fundamentalists make the mission assignment narrower than Jesus did. They allow their emphasis on direct evangelism to undercut other biblical ministries of mercy and justice. This narrowed definition of what a missionary ought to be and do is a contention between us.

### 4. Pastor.

What is the task of the pastor? They argue the pastor should be the ruler of a congregation. This smacks of the bishops’ task in the Middle Ages. It also sounds much like the kind of church leadership Baptists revolted against in the seventeenth century.

Our understanding of the role of the pastor is to be a servant/shepherd. Respecting lay leadership is our assignment. Allowing the congregation to make real decisions is of the very nature of Baptist congregationalism. And using corporate business models to “get results” is building the Church by the rules of a secular world rather than witnessing to the secular world by way of a servant Church.

### 5. Women.

The New Testament gives two signals about the role of women. A literal interpretation of Paul can build a case for making women submissive to men in the Church. But another body of scripture points toward another place for women. In Gal. 3:27-28 Paul wrote, “As many of you as are baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus (NSRV).”

We take Galatians as a clue to the way the Church should be ordered. We interpret the reference to women the same way we interpret the reference to slaves. If we have submissive roles for women, we must also have a place for the slaves in the Church.

In Galatians Paul follows the spirit of Jesus who courageously challenged the conventional wisdom of his day. It was a wisdom with rigid boundaries between men and women in religion and in public life. Jesus deliberately broke those barriers. He called women to follow him; he treated women as equally capable of dealing with sacred issues. Our model for the role of women in matters of faith is the Lord Jesus.

#### 6. *Church.*

An ecumenical and inclusive attitude is basic to our fellowship. The great ideas of theology are the common property of all the church. Baptists are only a part of that great and inclusive Church. So, we are eager to have fellowship with our brothers and sisters in the faith and to recognize their work for our Savior. We do not try to make them conform to us; we try to include them in our design for mission. Mending the torn fabric of both Baptist and Christian fellowship is important to us. God willing, we will bind together the broken parts into a new company in preview of the great fellowship we shall have with each other in heaven.

It should be apparent that the points of difference are critical. They are the stuff around which a fellowship such as the Southern Baptist Convention is made. We are different. It

is regrettable, but we are different. And perhaps we are most different at the point of spirit. At no place have we been able to negotiate about these differences. Were our fundamentalist brethren to negotiate, they would compromise. And that would be a sin by their understandings. So, we can either come to their position, or we can form a new fellowship.

#### **III. We Are Called to Do More than Politic.**

Some people would have us continue as we have over the last twelve years, and continue to work with the SBC with a point of view to change the SBC. On the face of it this argument sounds reasonable. Acting it out is more difficult.

To change the SBC requires a majority vote. To effect a majority in annual session requires massive, expensive, contentious activity. We have done this, and we have done it repeatedly.

But we have never enjoyed doing it. Something is wrong with a religious body that spends such energy in overt political activity. Our time is unwisely invested in beating people or trying to beat people. We have to define the other side as bad and we are good. There is division. The existence of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship is a simple confession

of that division; it is not the cause of that division.

We can no longer devote our major energies to SBC politics. We would rejoice, however, to see the SBC return to its historic Baptist convictions. Our primary call is to be true to our understanding of the gospel. We are to advance the gospel in our time. When we get to heaven, God is not going to ask us, "Did you win in Atlanta in June of 1991?" If we understand the orders we are under, we will be asked larger questions. And to spend our time trying to reclaim a human institution (people made the SBC; it is not a scriptural entity) is to make more of that institution that we ought to make. A denomination is a missions delivery system; it is not meant to be an idol. When we make more of the SBC than we ought, we risk falling into idolatry. Twelve years is too long to engage in political activity. We are called to higher purposes.

## Conclusion

- That we may have a voice in our Baptist mission ... for that is our Baptist birthright ...
- That we may work by ideas consistent with our understanding of the gospel rather than fund ideas that are not our gospel ...

- That we may give our energies to the advancement of the Kingdom of God rather than in divisive, destructive politics ...

## The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms

For these reasons we form the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. This does not require that we sever ties with the old Southern Baptist Convention. It does give us another mission delivery system, one more like our understanding of what it means to be Baptist and what it means to do gospel. Therefore, we create a new instrument to further the Kingdom and enlarge the Body of Christ.

*Cooperative Baptist Fellowship*



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