

# *The Fight Among the Baptists*

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The film *The Natural* features a character known as “the judge.” He is a slightly sinister, mysterious figure who manipulates the fate of a major league baseball team. From his shuttered and darkened office overlooking the bleachers and the field below, the judge keeps watch upon the team and its players. It is he, from his lofty perch, who determines the outcome of events for players and team alike, not the performance of the players, the stratagems of the manager, or the bounce of the ball. Sometimes life imitates art. Believe it or not, the embattled Southern Baptist Convention has a judge. He really exists, although seldom to never is he pictured in the press releases on the theological-political war that has raged in the denomination since 1979. Nonetheless, he is a key figure behind the fundamentalist forces which have been conducting since 1979 a highly successful campaign of precinct-style political networking to gain control of the Southern Baptist Convention.

The judge, whose name is Paul Pressler, is a real judge who sits on the bench of a state appeals court in Houston, Texas. He is an experienced politician who held a seat in the Texas legislature while he was still a law student at the University of Texas. Judge Pressler claims long-standing Baptist connections. He comes from a family of lawyers and lay preachers, and his grandfather figured in the Texas Regulars, an organization of Texas Democrats who opposed Roosevelt and the New Deal. He also talks about his experiences at Phillips-Exeter and Princeton University as exposing him to the horrors of “liberal” Christianity.

In a radio interview last year, the judge, who has usually been much more guarded about the details of his personal role in the denomination fight, candidly admitted to the host of “Firestorm Chats,” Dr. Gary North, that he, Pressler, was the very one who discovered the key to grabbing control of the denomination for fundamentalist-conservatives.

The key turned out to be a careless flaw in the SBC (Southern Baptist Convention) constitution, namely that the president of the Convention was authorized to appoint, single-handedly, the several most important committees of the denomination. One such committee, the Committee on Committees, makes the nominations of those who will serve on the most important committee of all, the one that nominates trustees for all twenty of the denomination’s agencies and institutions! It dawned on Pressler that all fundamentalists would need to do to get a stranglehold on the denomination would be to elect one of their number to the presidency of the Convention. Then it would be a simple matter to stack the key committees with fundamentalists who were committed to the agenda of denominational control by the fundamentalist faction. If a string of such presidents could be elected, in due course the trustee boards would have fundamentalist majorities.

The plan that Judge Pressler conceived, along with Dr. Paige Patterson of Dallas' First Baptist Church (Associate Pastor and President of the Independent Criswell Bible Institute), was to go on the road with a message and an agenda. The agenda was to build across the states of the Convention a network of like-minded people who would commit themselves to (1) go as messengers to the annual conventions, (2) vote for the party candidates, and (3) when called upon, serve the party's purposes on committees or trustee boards of the denomination. The message carried to the hustings by the judge and his friends was that the Southern Baptist Convention's agencies and theological seminaries were corrupted by heresy. The institutions, said Pressler and Patterson, had been infiltrated by those who were infected with "liberalism." Specifically, they claimed that the seminaries had many teachers who did not believe in the doctrine of the inerrancy of the Bible. Biblical inerrancy became the slogan and battle cry of the new movement. The imposition of an inerrancy creed upon the Convention and its agencies became the official purpose of the movement.

Despite a surprisingly strong response by moderates throughout the Convention who began to organize in response to this movement in late 1980, the fundamentalist juggernaut could not be avoided. By 1986, the signs of fundamentalist success and the seriousness of the situation were most evident in the phenomenon of closely divided votes on boards of trustees. Although the fundamentalists have won every presidential election to date, they are just approaching the point of dominating the trustee boards, so consequently, there have been few firings or other dramatic signs of their control. With the election of Adrian Rogers in Atlanta in 1986, fundamentalists seem assured of the power to continue stacking trustee boards for the next two years, which should give them majorities on almost every board.

A peace committee formed in 1985 has been working in secret sessions ever since to quiet the political struggle. Most knowledgeable observers hold no hope that it will be able to deal with the foundational issues such as constitutional revision to make the political control of the annual convention through the presidency less easy. One state Baptist paper editor observed that the more insiders knew about what was going on in the peace committee, the more pessimistic they were. Moderates are convinced that the peace committee members have succumbed to a sort of "real politic" which holds that the fundamentalists have so much power, that the real purpose of the peace committee is to appease them, acting as the court of high commission which decides how much has to be given to accomplish that purpose. Meanwhile all the fundamentalist side needs to do to finish off their capture is to quiet things down in the press, talk peace, and let their control of the platform and presidency continue to pump out the trustee nominations they need.

There are some paradoxes to ponder. One is that there has not been much of a debate or dialogue on the Bible issue. The fundamentalists use inerrancy mainly as a slogan. Moderates have, up to now and for the most part, side-stepped the Bible issue because they believe that the people who have either the mind or the stomach for a serious theological discussion are too small a percentage even among the preachers. Consequently, the fundamentalists have

out-Bibled the moderates.

A second paradox is that Southern Baptists, the most non-connectional of American denominations, have such an overwhelming tradition of denominational conformity that few churches could be led away from the Convention no matter how seriously the fundamentalist takeover may shape institutions like the seminaries or the foreign and home mission boards.

A third paradox is that the fundamentalists have not been winning, for the most part, in the state Baptist conventions, but have been winning consistently in the national meetings. Baptists in Texas account for nearly a third of the numerical and financial strength of the denomination, and yet the Texas state convention consistently turns back fundamentalist candidates and agenda. You would think Texas alone could beat fundamentalists at the national level.

The fourth paradox is that Baptists, who are non-creedal by tradition, and who have built in the SBC the largest Protestant denomination in America without basing their unity upon a creed, are now dividing over a successful political bid to give them one. A personal confession of the doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture will soon be the test for trustworthiness for theological professors and denominational agency executives.

Having formed three theological seminaries, an independent foreign missions organization (formed in late 1986), and one national newspaper, fundamentalist Southern Baptists have a shadow denomination in place already. Unless moderates have a turn of luck, the fundamentalists may soon not need those "shadow" institutions.