

Dueling Southern Baptist Press Agencies: An Examination of Coverage of
Denominational Controversies by Baptist Press and Associated Baptist Press

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Introduction

Off-duty police officers guarded the doors to the room where the Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention voted 45-15 to fire Dan Martin and Al Shackleford from their posts at *Baptist Press*, the convention's official news agency. The vote took place July 17, 1990, and opened the SBC to more national controversy than had been seen in over a decade of denominational infighting¹ between conservative and moderate factions.² Besides national media attention, the firings of Martin, *BP* news director, and Shackleford, *BP* director, signaled a victory for conservative Southern Baptists in a crucial battle over how denominational politics would be reported to the churches. Immediately after the firings, a group of journalists who worked for Southern Baptist newspapers announced the formation of a new Baptist news agency, the *Associated Baptist Press*. The SBC has been wracked by controversy numerous times since the 1991 foundation of *ABP*. And as both news agencies have covered these controversies, the outlook and focus of the news agencies has become evident. While *ABP* and *BP* cover many of the same stories, they offer sometimes radically different reporting of the events. This examination will highlight the divergent coverage as outlined in several high-profile controversies within the denomination. While a number of historians and social scientists have examined the Southern Baptist controversy, there has been little focus on the competing press voices that have arisen in the midst of the controversy. This study is significant for its focus on the struggle for press coverage

¹ David T. Morgan, *The New Crusades, The New Holy Land: Conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention, 1969-1991* (Tuscaloosa, Ala.: University of Alabama Press, 1996), 160.

² Throughout the course of the Southern Baptist controversy, there has been debate over what to call the two sides. Early historians, notably Morgan, labeled the two sides "fundamentalist" and "conservative." However, subsequent reporting has settled on the names "conservative" instead of "fundamentalist" and "moderate" instead of "conservative." This paper follows more recent naming conventions by using "conservative" and "moderate" to differentiate between the sides, although both would be considered "conservative" when compared to the broader spectrum of society.

between the two sides in the denomination's power struggle. Further, the comparison of these press agencies utilizes James Carey's cultural history of journalism as a theoretical framework for examining the stories that have appeared in these two agencies. It examines the formative history of an "alternative" press voice for those who have been displaced from power in a major religious denomination. Carey noted that journalism, like other literary works, "is a creative and imaginative work, a symbolic strategy; journalism sizes up situations, names their elements, and names them in a way that contains an attitude toward them."³ In the reporting of the *Baptist Press* and especially the *Associated Baptist Press*, such symbolic strategy is seen at work as journalists with both agencies sought to put controversial events into perspective and evinced an attitude toward those events and elements. As such, this brief history seeks to "look at journalism as a text that said something about something to someone: to grasp the forms of consciousness, the imaginations, the interpretations of reality journalism has contained."⁴ In doing so, this research offers timely lessons for journalists who would seek their fortunes in the pages of denominational publications. Finally, despite Martin Marty's 1963 call for a "sustained analysis" of the religious press in America, little academic research has focused on the denominational press agencies.⁵ Indeed, the researcher could locate no such academic analysis in his review of the literature. As the Southern Baptist Convention lists over 16 million members as the largest protestant denomination in America, a study of its denominational press seems significant.⁶ At present, the

³ James W. Carey, "The Problem of Journalism History," in James Carey: A Critical Reader, Eve Stryker Munson and Catherine A. Warren, eds. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 91.

⁴ Carey, "The Problem of Journalism History," 93.

⁵ Martin E. Marty, John G. Deedy Jr., David Wolf Silverman and Robert Lekachman, *The Religious Press in America*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), vii.

⁶ "About Us," Southern Baptist Convention Web site. Available at <http://www.sbc.net/aboutus/default.asp>.

Associated Baptist Press claims subscriptions from 33 state and regional Baptist newspapers with a combined circulation of 1.3 million households.⁷ The *Baptist Press* circulates to state Baptist newspapers with a combined circulation of 1.6 million.⁸

Background

Historians trace the beginnings of the conservative takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention to the late 1960s, during a period of social unrest in the U.S. Conservative Southern Baptists, dismayed over what they perceived as a theological drift and a lack of zeal to resist societal changes within the denominational bureaucracy, began agitating to “take back” the convention.⁹ During the early 1970s, a small group of conservative Baptists developed a plan to take over the bureaucracy of the SBC through presidential elections. Judge Paul Pressler, an appeals court judge from Houston, Texas, and Paige Patterson, a Baptist pastor, are most often credited with implementing this plan with the help of a group of like-minded pastors throughout the SBC.¹⁰ The plan itself began to unfold in 1979, when conservatives elected their first president, Adrian Rogers, pastor of a large church in Tennessee. Rogers began appointing members to the committee that appointed board members for various SBC agencies. A string of presidential elections throughout the 1980s led to wholesale changes in the theological and social priorities of the convention. Pressler, Patterson and their compatriots used the theological banner of Biblical inerrancy – the belief that the Bible is completely without

⁷ “What’s ABP?” Associated Baptist Press Web site. Available at <http://www.abpnews.com/abpnews/whatsabp.cfm>.

⁸ “About Us: BP News,” Southern Baptist Convention Web site. Available at: <http://www.sbc.net/aboutus/bpnews.asp>.

⁹ Morgan, *The New Crusades*, 8-10.

¹⁰ James C. Hefley, *The Truth In Crisis: Bringing the Controversy Up-to-Date, Vol. 2*, (Hannibal, Mo.: Hannibal Books, 1987), 1. Pressler and Patterson implemented the plan, but Morgan notes that the plan was actually developed by Bill Powell in the early 1970s and presented to Pressler and Patterson in 1972.

error in its original form - to prod followers to elect them to positions of leadership.

While the conservatives were electing presidents, convention moderates were fighting in vain to stem the tide of appointments. At conventions throughout the early 1980s, the moderates put up candidates in opposition to the conservative candidates for SBC president, but were unable to field a majority in convention votes.

Throughout the controversy, state Baptist newspapers reported on moves by both factions.¹¹ Much of this reporting was provided by the *Baptist Press*, an arm of the Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention, located in Nashville. The *Baptist Press* operated much like the *Associated Press*, gathering stories about Baptists from throughout the world and relaying those stories to state Southern Baptist newspaper editors and other interested news media.¹² The work of seasoned journalists like Shackleford and Martin garnered a reputation for BP as “among the most respected denominational news operations in the country.”¹³ Reporting on the controversy within the convention did not please conservatives. Despite the Baptist Press’ reputation outside the denomination, by the mid-1980s, “the denominational media establishment was soon branded as blatantly proliberal.”¹⁴ Indeed, conservative author James C. Hefley emphasized the leanings of denominational media in his 1986 book *The Truth In Crisis*.

¹¹ The Southern Baptist Convention is unlike many religious denominations, in that the relationship between the state conventions and the national convention is one of “association,” not “ownership.” State conventions fund their own state Baptist newspapers with local editors who often disagree with the conservative movement. This is in contrast to the *Baptist Press* which is owned and run by the national convention executive committee.

¹² In the 1990s, Baptist Press news releases arrived via FAX machine or mail two to three times a week, or more often if events warranted. When ABP arrived, they followed a similar practice. Only in the mid-1990s, after the widespread acceptance of the World Wide Web, were laypeople able to access the releases from *Baptist Press* or *Associated Baptist Press*.

¹³ Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Baptist Battles: Social Change and Religious Conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 187.

¹⁴ Ammerman, *Baptist Battles*, 187.

“... most staff (agency) power is still in the hands of moderates. This includes the SBC media, who can probably be expected to stand with the agencies, whether controlled by moderates or conservatives.”¹⁵ Hefley’s prescient words would bear out in the coverage offered by *Baptist Press* throughout the 1990s.

By 1990, conservatives were in almost total control of the convention’s governing committees. Trustee boards began to oust moderates from the agencies that ran the day-to-day operations of the SBC. In this atmosphere, the *Baptist Press* came under intense scrutiny. Pressler had been elected to the executive committee of the convention, and began a campaign to steer the *Baptist Press* away from what he perceived as negative coverage of the conservative movement. In June of 1990, Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee President Harold C. Bennett was instructed to ask for Al Shackleford and Dan Martin to tender their resignations. Martin and Shackleford refused to resign, and Bennett refused to fire them, setting up an inevitable showdown that culminated in the executive committee vote on July 17, 1990.¹⁶ It would be less than three months before a new Baptist news agency began publishing news about Southern Baptist events: *Associated Baptist Press*. Martin was intimately involved in the start-up of this new agency, serving as interim news director from September 1990 to January 1991.¹⁷ He was enlisted in the effort by an informal group of nine state Baptist newspaper editors

¹⁵ James C. Hefley, *The Truth in Crisis: The Controversy in the Southern Baptist Convention*, (Dallas: Criterion Publishing, 1986), 199.

¹⁶ C. William Junker, *Contending for the Right to Know: A History of the Southern Baptist Press Association: 1895-1995* (Franklin, Tenn.: Providence House Publishing, 1996), 214.

¹⁷ Stan Hasty, “The History of the Associated Baptist Press,” in *The Struggle for the Soul of the SBC: Moderate Responses to the Fundamentalist Movement*, Walter B. Shurden, ed. (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1993), 180-181. Martin eventually served in a limited role as a freelance reporter for ABP, but Shackleford was not involved in the new agency.

and a public relations expert. When the *ABP* severed its ties with the public relations agency in January 1991, Martin left as well.¹⁸

This study examines the dual Southern Baptist news agencies through the agencies' reporting on high-profile SBC controversies in the 1990s. Both news agencies covered these controversies, but an examination of that coverage showed two divergent voices reporting on the same reality. The 1990s were a period of continuing turmoil within the convention, which provided ample resources for research about the two agencies. Several themes emerged in an examination of this coverage. These themes: politics, power and theology. These themes will guide a discussion of how these dueling agencies covered Southern Baptists. Short excerpts from selected stories will serve to illustrate the divergence between these two news sources. For the sake of brevity, excerpts will deal with coverage of controversies related to the Southern Baptist seminaries and the changes to the Baptist Faith and Message.¹⁹ The period examined in the course of this research commences with the hiring of the first full-time editor of the Associated Baptist Press in April, 1991, and ends with the adoption of the 2000 revision of the Baptist Faith and Message.

Seminaries

No area of disagreement between moderates and conservatives burned as hot in the 1990s as the issue of Southern Baptist seminaries. After consolidating power in the 1980s, conservatives began to steer the six seminaries of the convention on a more

¹⁸ Hasty, "The History of the Associated Baptist Press," 180-181.

¹⁹ A full examination of controversies within the Southern Baptist Convention during the 1990s would include discussion of convention seminaries, denominational agencies, the conservative leadership and political organization, the moderate Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, the Cooperative Program funding mechanism, and the social differences between groups that showed up in the changes to the denomination's faith statement.

conservative course, emphasizing “biblical inerrancy” as a point of theological commitment.²⁰

Both the *Baptist Press* and the *Associated Baptist Press* reported on the power struggles at the seminaries, but chose different approaches. The *Baptist Press*, as the official news agency, most often emphasized process in reporting. Faculty were hired and fired, trustees selected presidents, and moderate trustees resigned from boards. The *Associated Baptist Press*, on the other hand, emphasized the politics behind the process. Frequently, *Associated Baptist Press* developed stories that provided a voice for moderates who were opposed to the changes. The *ABP* also circled back to the history of the conservative takeover, providing a moderate context to each new controversy.

In October, 1991, trustees at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary voted to include a statement affirming a belief in inerrancy in the seminary’s “statement of purpose.” *ABP* and *BP* covered the story differently. Both news agencies included the adoption in the lead of an article on the trustee meeting. However, *BP*’s coverage in the lead was followed by six paragraphs of process: appointments and news relating to the statement of purpose, before returning to the issue of inerrancy. *ABP*’s Greg Warner focused his entire story on the inerrancy clause, with only a few paragraphs mentioning other activities by the trustees. The leads of the two stories hint at the different focus:

Baptist Press: Trustees of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in a meeting Oct. 14-15 elected officers, added two new trustees and proposed a change to the seminary’s statement of purpose which would add the word “inerrancy” in regards to the Bible.²¹

²⁰ Within the constellation of seminaries, three stood out: Southeastern because it was seen by conservatives as the most liberal; Southern because it is the oldest Southern Baptist seminary; and Southwestern because of its position as the largest seminary in the world. While all six seminaries became more conservative in the 1990s, the most heated battles took place at these three. Indeed, as early as 1985, Southwestern’s president was under fire from conservative trustees, although it would take another decade before they were able to fire him. See Ammerman, *Baptist Battles*, 243-252 for a complete discussion of the seminary controversies prior to 1991.

²¹ “SEBTS trustees recommend ‘inerrancy’ in statement,” *Baptist Press*, Oct. 22, 1991.

Associated Baptist Press: Trustees of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary voted Oct. 15 to include a commitment to biblical inerrancy in the school's new statement of purpose, becoming the first Southern Baptist seminary to adopt such an explicit endorsement of inerrancy.²²

Later in the story, Warner returned to the political context of the action, writing that inerrancy “has been at the heart of the 12-year controversy among Southern Baptists” and “has been the focal point of a four-year effort by Southeastern’s fundamental-conservative trustees to change the direction of the school.”²³

ABP's coverage also included discussion from the meeting in which trustees wrangled over the final language of the new statement, details which were missing from the *BP* coverage.²⁴ Such coverage highlighted the politics of the move that was not evident in the surface process reporting by *BP*.

Southeastern wasn't the only seminary under scrutiny in the 1990s. Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, would soon be embroiled in a series of controversies that raged across the pages of the two news agencies.

In March 1993, trustees selected R. Albert Mohler as the new president of Southern, replacing Roy L. Honeycutt. Mohler's selection led both *BP* and *ABP* news packages for March 29, 1993. The coverage illustrated divergent views on Mohler's appointment and what it foretold for the seminary. Again, process, politics and theology proved the thematic underpinning for coverage.

²² Greg Warner, “Southeastern trustees want to make inerrancy part of governing documents,” *Associated Baptist Press*, Oct. 17, 1991, 1.

²³ Warner, “Southeastern trustees” Oct. 17, 1991, 1.

²⁴ Warner, “Southeastern trustees,” 2. William Delahoyde of Raleigh, N.C. chaired the revision committee, which wanted to affirm the “complete veracity of the Bible.” However, trustee Robert Crowley moved to add the word “inerrancy” to the document, saying “This is our course. This is who we are. And let's say it. If this is not what this has been about, I've been under a rock all this time.”

Baptist Press: R. Albert Mohler Jr., a 33-year-old conservative theologian and Baptist editor, was approved by trustees of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary March 26 as the next president of one of the key institutions in Southern Baptist life.²⁵

Associated Baptist Press: R. Albert Mohler Jr. was elected the ninth president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary March 26 by a 46-5 vote of the seminary's trustees during a called meeting held in executive session.²⁶

But what follows the lead showed the true divergence of coverage.

Baptist Press devoted six paragraphs to Mohler's predecessor Honeycutt before quoting the new president from a news conference following his appointment.

Conversely, *Associated Baptist Press* followed the lead with this ominous-sounding paragraph: "The 33-year-old editor of Georgia Baptists' weekly newsjournal pledged his commitment to the conservative movement within the Southern Baptist Convention, to the inerrancy of Scripture and to the seminary's Abstract of Principles, its governing theological document."

ABP's Mark Wingfield included in the story coverage of questions surrounding the called meeting, its costs, and the fact that students protested the search committee's activities – all issues that hinted at the political underpinnings of the story. None of these issues appeared in the *BP* coverage.²⁷

Sidebars to the main story highlighted the differences between the agencies as well. *BP*'s stories included "Mohler expresses devotion to Southern, conservatism," and "Mohler's love for Southern evident at home, office."²⁸ *ABP*'s stories were: "President-

²⁵ Art Toalston, "Trustees approve Mohler as Southern's new president," *Baptist Press*, March 29, 1993, 1.

²⁶ Mark Wingfield, "Mohler elected president of Southern on 46-5 vote," *Associated Baptist Press*, March 30, 1993, 1.

²⁷ Wingfield, "Mohler elected", 2.

²⁸ *Baptist Press*, March 29, 1993, headlines on page 1.

elect says he stands behind doctrinal statement,” and “Mohler’s views expressed in Index editorials.”²⁹

Less than a month would pass before Southern would again face controversy, this time over faculty chair appointments, which would result in the resignation of three moderate trustees.

ABP devoted three separate stories to the Southern trustee meeting: one on the faculty appointments, one on trustee resignations, and one on the gap between students and administrators. *BP* devoted one story to the meeting, mentioning the resignations in the lead and covering the faculty appointment controversy in the body of the story.³⁰

ABP’s coverage of the trustee resignations focused on the resignation statements by the three trustees. The coverage highlighted tensions on the board, including this paragraph: “Two other trustees on the conservative-dominated board questioned the tone and content of statements made by the resigning trustees – all identified as moderates – and attempted to stop one of them from speaking.”³¹ The exchange was not covered in the *BP* story, although *BP* did include portions of the statements from the resigning trustees.³²

The seminary controversy that burned hottest, however, was the firing of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary President Russell Dilday in 1994. The divergence in coverage is evident from the headlines that topped the initial reporting on Dilday’s firing. *ABP*: “Southwestern Trustees fire Dilday; students left to wonder ‘Why?’” *BP*: “Southwestern Seminary trustees fire President Russell Dilday.”

²⁹ *Associated Baptist Press*, March 30, 1993, headlines on page 1.

³⁰ David R. Wilkinson, “Southern Seminary board meeting ends with trustee resignations,” April 22, 1993, 2.

³¹ Wingfield, “Three moderate trustees resign Southern’s board,” April 22, 1993, 4.

³² Wilkinson, “Southern Seminary board meeting,” 3.

Herb Hollinger's BP report did not mention "deteriorating" relations between Dilday and the trustees until nine paragraphs down in the story. The ABP story led with colorful phrases that revealed a more bitter scene. The firing caused "bitter reactions from students," wrote Toby Druin and Greg Warner.

When Trustee Chairman Ralph Pulley relayed the decision to students, the students "booed and jeered in response."

"Pulley read students a letter from trustees which offered no explanation for the action. 'Why? Why?!' students yelled. He asked students to make suggestions for Dilday's successor, to which they chanted 'Dilday! Dilday! Dilday!'"³³

The Baptist Faith & Message

Perhaps no controversy had as much import for the future of the convention as the historic revision of the Baptist Faith and Message that was undertaken in the fall of 1999. The Faith and Message is a document that Baptists first adopted in 1925 to set the boundaries of belief for those who align themselves as Southern Baptists. It was revised in 1963. The new revision, undertaken under the convention presidency of Paige Patterson, produced nervousness in the moderate faction of the convention. This impression showed up early in *ABP* reports on the new revision committee.

The report on the naming of the committee included telling details about the committee's makeup that differed from the 1963 revision committee.

The make-up of the committee is significantly different from one appointed by SBC President Herschel Hobbs in 1962. Hobbs named the sitting presidents of each state convention to the committee, which presented its report in 1963.

"What we had then was a serious group of leaders who were all the presidents of the state conventions," recalled Wayne Ward, an adviser to the 1963 committee. Ward, a retired professor at Southern Baptist

³³ Toby Druin and Greg Warner, "Southwestern Trustees fire Dilday; students left to wonder 'Why?'" *Associated Baptist Press*, March 10, 1994.

Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., said Hobbs viewed that appointment process as the best way to "have a representative committee." "You didn't have a hand-picked committee like this one is," Ward added.³⁴

Moderates had reason to be nervous, as the Baptist Faith and Message had only just been amended with a controversial "family amendment" ratified by conservatives. Bob Allen's ABP report on the proposed amendment quoted from two female members of the amendment committee: Mary Mohler and Dorothy Patterson – both of whom are married to seminary presidents. But he also quoted Becca Gurney of Baptist Women in Ministry and Robert Parham of the Baptist Center for Ethics, both of whom were opposed to the amendment. It concludes with a theme that defines *ABP* coverage – a reminder of the changes in the convention over the past 20 years:

The "Baptist Faith and Message," revised in 1963 from an earlier 1925 version, is not officially a creed since it is not binding on churches or individual believers. Southern Baptist seminaries and other agencies, however, require denominational employees to accept its 17 tenets. The statement's first article, titled "The Scriptures," was used as a litmus test by conservatives who won control of the nation's largest non-Catholic faith group from moderates during the 1980s.³⁵

Baptist Press also ran a story about Mrs. Patterson and Mrs. Mohler during the convention, but quoted no opponents to the amendment, despite a lead paragraph pointing out that there was such opposition. "While some women recoil at the idea of submitting to their husbands, respect for God's Word and trust in his wisdom should convince them to follow God's plan for the family," wrote Mark Kelly.³⁶

³⁴ Trennis Henderson, "Study of 'Baptist Faith and Message' scheduled to get underway this fall," *Associated Baptist Press*, Sept. 23, 1999.

³⁵ Bob Allen, "Article on 'family' proposed to SBC statement of faith," *Associated Baptist Press*, May 12, 1998.

³⁶ Mark Kelly, "Respect, trust God's plan for family, women say," *Baptist Press*, June 10, 1998. Accessed at <http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?ID=4347>.

During the convention meeting in June, 1998, the *ABP* report on the adoption led with political overtones:

SALT LAKE CITY (ABP) -- Attempts to soften language which urges wives to submit to their husbands and to include references to single adults and widows were handily turned aside as a section on family was added to the Southern Baptist Convention's doctrinal statement June 9.³⁷

The *BP* report mentioned the two amendment attempts in the second paragraph:

SALT LAKE CITY (BP)--Messengers to the Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting added a statement on the family to their 35-year-old Baptist Faith and Message statement during the Tuesday afternoon session, June 9, in Salt Lake City's Salt Palace Convention Center.

The four-paragraph statement was adopted as presented after the failure of two efforts to amend it.³⁸

The ABP would return to the issue of single parents in reporting after the adoption. "Critics say SBC family statement singles out married with children" was the headline on a July 30, 1998 article by Ashlee Ross. The fact that the article was produced over a month after the convention adoption showed that for moderates, the amendment was still a sore issue. That impression was reinforced when the Baptist General Convention of Texas voted in November 1999 to adopt a version of the Baptist Faith and Message without the family amendment.

Articles on the Texas move highlighted the division between moderate Texas leadership and conservative SBC leadership on the theological issues, as well as the different reporting styles of *Baptist Press* and *Associated Baptist Press*. The *ABP* coverage lead with an active verb:

³⁷ Wingfield, "SBC approves family statement, declining to add amendments," *Associated Baptist Press*, June 10, 1998.

³⁸ Kelly, "Southern Baptists adopt statement on family," *Baptist Press*, June 8, 1998. Accessed at <http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?ID=4345>.

ABP: The Baptist General Convention of Texas voted Nov. 9 to make the 1963 "Baptist Faith and Message" the "unifying statement of our common faith and practice."

BP, on the other hand, emphasized the process of the adoption, using a passive verb in the lead. The Baptist Press lead is so different from the Associated Baptist Press recount that one must read the stories through twice to make sure they are writing about the same event.

BP: EL PASO, Texas - A motion placed before the Baptist General Convention of Texas to affirm the 1963 Southern Baptist Convention statement of beliefs -- not the 1998 revision which adds a section on marriage and family -- was passed during the BGCT annual meeting's Nov. 9 morning session.³⁹

Baptist Press went on to emphasize how the Texas motion put the convention "at odds" with the national convention, and also "an array of U.S. evangelicals who have affirmed the family article."⁴⁰

Both news services used prepared statements from Patterson, Mohler and Richard Land, three of the top spokesmen for the conservative movement in the SBC, opposing the Texas move. But in the context of the surrounding story, the quotes give different impressions. Patterson, for instance, said "I am grateful the BGCT leadership has made crystal clear for the sake of Texas Baptist churches where they stand on family and church issues. Now it is up to the churches to decide with whom they agree -- with a liberal, culturally acceptable view of family and church or with a Christ-honoring, Bible-believing perspective,"⁴¹

³⁹ Toalston, "Texas Baptist convention counters SBC stance on marriage and family," *Baptist Press*, Nov. 9, 1999. Accessed at <http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?ID=1586>.

⁴⁰ Toalston, "Texas Baptist convention counters SBC stance on marriage and family."

⁴¹ Wingfield, "Texas Baptists affirm SBC statement sans controversial article on the family," *Associated Baptist Press*, Nov. 11, 1999.

Within the context of the *ABP* story that is positive toward the adoption of the 1963 statement, Patterson's quote appears as a reminder of the sharp disagreements between moderates and conservatives. The quotes by Patterson, Mohler and Land are given prominence in the negative side of the conflict, as narrow-minded fundamentalists who have destroyed the cooperation between the state and national conventions. Within the *BP* story, the quote appears to confirm the fact that the Baptist General Convention of Texas is indeed "at odds" with the wider community of Southern Baptists and evangelicals. Patterson, Mohler and Land are seen as champions of the positive side of the conflict, rescuing the national convention from "liberal" theology.

In May 2000, moderate fears were realized as the Baptist Faith and Message revision committee released its proposed changes one month before the report was to be voted on at the annual convention gathering, meeting that year in Orlando, Fla. Theological interpretation was again at the center of controversy, and the center of the reporting by *ABP* and *BP*.

Baptist Press' coverage of the report emphasized that the proposals called for "some revisions, but no new articles."⁴² But it was precisely those "revisions" that revealed the differences between moderates and conservatives within the convention, and the *ABP* led its coverage with those issues.

Proposed revisions to Southern Baptists' official statement of faith tighten boundaries on biblical interpretation and theology and emphasize that God is all-knowing and that people must accept Christ to be saved. Others discourage the ordination of women as pastors, reject charismatic teachings, oppose abortion and homosexuality and soften requirements for keeping the Sabbath.⁴³

⁴² Herb Hollinger, "BF&M study has 1925, 1963 elements; no new articles," *Baptist Press*, May 18, 2000. Accessed at <http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?ID=5850>.

⁴³ Allen, "Committee proposed revisions to 'Baptist Faith and Message,'" *Associated Baptist Press*, May 18, 2000. Accessed at <http://www.abpnews.com/abpnews/story.cfm?newsId=2078>.

The terms used: “tighten boundaries,” “must accept,” “discourage,” “reject” and “oppose” paint quite a different picture of the proposed changes than the one that emerges from the Baptist Press story. The initial reporting by *ABP* did not include reaction quotes from moderate leaders, but that story would follow soon. On May 23, 2000, Bob Allen wrote “Reaction to proposed statement focuses on women’s ordination,” which included quotes from leaders opposed to the changes, as well as a summary of national press coverage of the issue.⁴⁴ The *Baptist Press* did not have a story quoting opposition voices, but ran an unedited statement from the revision committee on May 26, 2000 which responded to some of the criticism.⁴⁵

With a full month of debate and coverage prior to the convention, the coverage of the actual adoption was somewhat anti-climactic, although headlines told the story from the viewpoint of two different factions. *ABP*’s wrap-up of the convention doesn’t mention the Baptist Faith and Message at all. “SBC moves forward with conservative agenda,” reads the headline on Bob Allen’s June 14, 2000 story.⁴⁶ Keith Henson’s *Baptist Press* story featuring quotes from committee members emphasized the theological underpinnings of the conservative movement. “Baptist Faith & Message Committee members say report embraces biblical authority,” was the headline. In sharp contrast to Allen’s earlier story emphasizing the “narrowing” of the document, Henson’s lead was positive, noting that “Southern Baptist embraced biblical authority and rejected a

⁴⁴ Allen, “Reaction to proposed statement focuses on women’s ordination,” *Associated Baptist Press*, May 23, 2000.

⁴⁵ “BF&M study committee releases statement,” *Baptist Press*, May 26, 2000. Accessed at <http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?ID=5899>.

⁴⁶ Allen, “SBC moves forward with conservative agenda,” *Associated Baptist Press*, June 14, 2000. Accessed at <http://www.abpnews.com/abpnews/story.cfm?newsId=2323>.

theology that divides Christ and the Bible from one another.”⁴⁷ In the two leads from Allen and Hinson can be seen the heart of the controversy that divided the Southern Baptist Convention: moderates saw the conservative movement as separating fellow Christians. Conservatives saw the moderates as separating Jesus Christ from the Bible.

Conclusion

It has been said that journalism is the first draft of history. Through the reporting of the official *Baptist Press* and the alternative *Associated Baptist Press*, it becomes apparent that a first draft of history from two sides of an issue is preferable to a single, “official” draft. Researchers should exercise caution when using such sources as primary material in historical research. They should also take the time to investigate the history and cultural milieu of the publications when using such sources. Reports by both agencies filled a definite role. The *Baptist Press* reports as the convention goes. That was the immediate result of the 1990 firings of Shackelford and Martin. And while such reports did not shy away from controversial subjects, the *ABP* reports showed that there is much detail that is left out of the “official” reporting on events. It is impossible to know for certain why there were such glaring omissions in the *BP* reporting, except to surmise that the things that were left out did not fit the “process” model preferred by the *BP*. It could be suggested that the Baptist Press and Associated Baptist Press practiced two different “forms” of newswriting. The BP practicing the more traditional, “objective” reporting, and the ABP using a more literary, “new” style of reporting. But the variety of bylines in both the ABP and BP would seem to mitigate that as an explanation. Certainly, one or two writers could differ on coverage of an event because of writing style. But a systemic variation over a decade surely indicates a far greater difference in coverage than mere

⁴⁷ Keith Hinson, “Baptist Faith & Message Committee members say report embraces biblical authority,” *Baptist Press*, June 14, 2000. Accessed at <http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?ID=6011>.

writing style. For the *ABP*, reasons for including such coverage seem much more obvious. The *ABP* was forged in the fire of controversy, and its very existence is bound up in the radical changes that overtook the Southern Baptist Convention. For the *ABP*, politics, power and theology are a trinity of themes that define the convention and its controversies. Because these reports went out to state editors until the mid-1990s, it is difficult to ascertain the reactions of the final audience of readers. Among state Baptist newspaper editors, there was a diversity of ways to handle the dual agency coverage. Some newspapers – most frequently aligned with more conservative state conventions – ran only *Baptist Press* stories. Others – aligned with moderate conventions like the Texas convention – ran mostly *Associated Baptist Press* coverage. And some papers ran a mixture of both.⁴⁸ James Carey’s cultural historical approach to journalism history suggests that there is a “consciousness” in the reports written by journalists. The journalist “sizes up situations, names their elements, and names them in a way that contains an attitude toward them.”⁴⁹ This is evident in this study. It is not surprising that the two agencies report from a different context, a different perspective on similar events. And that this reporting reveals the split in the denomination and how theology was being reinterpreted as conservatives took over the institutional forms of the convention.

⁴⁸ Hasty, “A History of the Associated Baptist Press,” 182-183.

⁴⁹ Carey, “The Problem of Journalism History,” 91.