



Nashville, Tennessee  
Associated  
Baptist Press

Editor: Bob Allen  
Executive editor: Greg Warner

Phone: 800.340.6626  
Fax: 904.262.7745  
E-mail: bob@abpnews.com

June 8, 1999

(99-47)

- Federal court intervenes to permit graduation prayers**
- D.Min., social-work students among graduates at seminary**
- Atlanta convention marks 20th anniversary of 'resurgence'**
- SBC's conservative movement had roots in Texas, observers say**
- Conservative resurgence founder tells his side of story in new book**

### **Federal court intervenes to permit graduation prayers**

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (ABP) -- High school seniors in Jacksonville, Fla., are thanking God for helping them to graduate, thanks to intervention by a federal appeals court to set aside a previous ruling banning commencement prayers.

The 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals granted a hearing to the Duval County School Board to defend its policy allowing voluntary student-led messages, which may include prayers, at high-school graduations.

The decision by the full court set aside an earlier ruling by a three-judge panel that the messages are unconstitutional.

At least four graduating classes opted for a commencement prayer June 7. Other classes scheduled to graduate later this week were expected to vote on whether or not to have a prayer and pick a student to give it.

The U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that school districts may not invite a clergyman to lead prayers at graduation, because it violates the First Amendment's ban on establishment of religion. The courts have been less clear, however, on whether the Constitution bans student-led prayers as well, the appeals court said in granting the hearing.

A three-judge panel of the court ruled in May that school-district guidelines leaving decisions about graduation prayers up to the students was an attempt to circumvent Supreme Court rulings against state-sponsored sectarian and proselytizing prayer.

## **D.Min., social-work students among graduates at seminary**

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- Inaugural classes in doctor-of-ministry and social work programs were among 38 graduates at Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond May 29.

Nine students received the doctor of ministry degree, which is designed for persons in full-time ministry. Two graduated from a dual master-of-divinity and master-of-social-work program, which includes study at Virginia Commonwealth University. Students in the master of divinity/master of social work program studied at Virginia Commonwealth after completing two years at the seminary.

Daniel Vestal, coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, spoke at the graduation ceremony.

-30-

-- By ABP staff

## **Atlanta convention marks 20th anniversary of 'resurgence'**

By Mark Wingfield

ATLANTA (ABP) -- This year's Southern Baptist Convention marks the 20th anniversary of two significant events:

-- The launch of Bold Mission Thrust, a comprehensive plan developed by the convention's leadership to take the gospel to every person on earth by the year 2000.

-- An effort spearheaded by two Texans to rally messengers to elect Memphis pastor Adrian Rogers as the convention's president, the first step in what would turn out to be a 15-year movement to reshape the denomination that became widely known as the "conservative resurgence."

After the 1979 SBC meeting in Houston, Texas editor Presnall Wood described dueling themes of "bold missions" and "bold politics."

"Only time will tell which will have the greater impact on the future of the Southern Baptist Convention," Wood editorialized in the next week's Baptist Standard.

On the eve of this year's convention, scheduled June 15-16 in Atlanta, everyone agrees the 1979 convention was a watershed for the nation's largest non-Catholic religious body. But the outcome of the question posed by the now-retired Texas editor remains very much in the eye of the beholder.

The Baptist Standard recently asked a cross section of Southern Baptist leaders this question: "How is Baptist life different in 1999 than it was in 1979 as a result of the so-called 'conservative resurgence' in the SBC?"

About half of those contacted responded, and their answers fell starkly into two categories.

Those who supported the conservative movement generally see the SBC as a better place because of the battle.

"God has honored the willingness of Southern Baptists to stand for the truth of his word," said Morris Chapman, president of the SBC Executive Committee.

Those who opposed the conservative movement, meanwhile, say the SBC is now a worse place than before. They contend bold politics stamped out bold mission.

"The last 20 years should be an embarrassment to any thinking, traditional Baptist," said David Currie, director of Texas Baptists Committed, a moderate group.

One vivid sign of changing times is Paige Patterson's expected re-election as SBC president at the upcoming convention. Twenty years ago, Patterson considered himself an outsider to the SBC bureaucracy when he and fellow Texan Paul Pressler launched the conservative movement.

"The Southern Baptist Convention has returned to the faith of its fathers," Patterson said. Pressler, the Houston appeals-court judge who worked with Patterson to lead the conservative movement, echoed that sentiment.

"In 1979, some conservative students were mocked and ridiculed for expressing traditional Christian beliefs in some of their classes in Southern Baptist seminaries," Pressler said. "Today, they are supported and affirmed in so doing. In 1979, some leaders of our public-affairs agencies supported abortion, opposed the death penalty and took similarly strong liberal stands on other issues. Our new public-affairs leaders have changed these positions."

Accusations about "liberalism" in Baptist colleges and seminaries would become the rallying cry of the conservative movement, with concerns about SBC leaders' stances on moral and political issues following closely behind.

Over the course of 15 years, however, the heads of every SBC seminary and agency were replaced with conservatives, either through resignation, retirement or firing. Scores of denominational employees left their jobs and were replaced with individuals who affirmed the conservative movement.

"The central issue that spawned and sustained the movement was the nature of Scripture and its significance for the practice of Christianity as expressed through Southern Baptists," said Chapman. He is one of nine men elected in almost-unbroken succession as SBC president with the blessing of what was early dubbed the Pressler-Patterson coalition. The change clearly has been for the better, said Chapman, who was a pastor in Wichita Falls, Texas, at the movement's launch.

"Those who predicted the new Southern Baptist Convention leadership would destroy the convention or alter it so radically that it would be unrecognizable have been proven wrong," Chapman said. "Southern Baptists are more committed than ever to their historic and bedrock principles, such as the inerrancy and sufficiency of Scripture, the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as God's only Son and our only Savior, the mandate to evangelize the world in cooperation with fellow believers, the practice and preaching of righteousness, the priesthood of the believer, the autonomy of the local church and the separation of church and state," he said.

But others view the changes -- particularly those at SBC seminaries -- with concern.

"The dark points are situations such as at Southwestern Seminary, where obscurantist fundamentalists demand professors to sign increasingly rigid doctrinal statements or face dismissal for matters that are secondary and about which Baptists have never agreed," said Joel Gregory. He is a former preaching professor at the seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, who later became pastor of the First Baptist Church of Dallas.

Gregory's statement referred to a new requirement at Southwestern Seminary that faculty members endorse a controversial statement on the family added last summer to the "Baptist Faith and Message" doctrinal statement.

But Gregory, who lost his place among conservative leadership when he resigned abruptly from the prestigious Dallas church, divorced and remarried and later wrote a book about his experience, also cited "bright points" in the movement. They include "men such as (Jimmy) Draper, who transcend the pettiness and embrace the entire denomination," said Gregory, who now works for a publishing company in Fort Worth.

Draper is generally credited with being the most conciliatory of the string of conservative presidents since 1979. A former pastor, he now heads the denomination's publishing house, LifeWay Christian Resources in Nashville, Tenn.

But unlike Gregory, a centrist who waffled before finally throwing his support to the conservative side, full-fledged moderates find nothing good to say about changes in the SBC.

"In 1979, Southern Baptists honored, cherished and practiced historic Baptist principles and practices, such as the authority of Scripture without creeds, the priesthood of all believers, local church autonomy and religious liberty for all," said Currie, director of Texas Baptists Committed. Currie's group has successfully defended the 2.7-million-member Baptist General Convention of Texas against a conservative takeover. "Today, Southern Baptist leaders and Southern Baptist seminaries do not even believe in these principles, much less preach, teach and practice Baptist principles, except for isolated instances of a professor here and there," Currie said.

Some on both sides of the fray say it has repercussions far beyond the SBC.

Some who railed against "creeping liberalism" in the SBC said it was symptomatic of a larger problem that had already affected much of American Christianity.

"As one pastor put it, the true comparison is not between what we are now and what we were when the conservative resurgence began," said Mark Coppenger, president of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Mo. "It is between what we are now and what we would have been had the resurgence not occurred."

"I submit that we would have looked much more like the mainline denominations by now, and our seminaries would have led the way had we let them," Coppenger said.

Pressler, in his new book, "A Hill on Which to Die," details his encounter with "Northern liberalism" while a student at a prestigious prep school and Princeton University in the Northeast.

"Perhaps it was a good thing for me to be exposed to radical liberal theology rather than to have liberalism subtly taught in its incipient form," he writes. "This way I could recognize it for what it was and see how far liberalism would go when its presuppositions were accepted."

Ultimately, Pressler writes, conservatives in the SBC "worked together because we believed that the restoration of the Southern Baptist Convention to a position of standing upon the complete trustworthiness of God's word was a hill on which to die."

"We believed that many people who could have been won to Jesus Christ would be eternally lost if liberal theology destroyed the Southern Baptist Convention as a force for evangelism and missions," Pressler writes.

On the other hand, John Baugh, a leading moderate voice and longtime Pressler nemesis, warns of equally far-reaching negative ramifications behind the conservative agenda.

"I am but one of many Baptists who continue to believe the so-called 'conservative resurgence' was no more than the cleverly devised means by which to seize control of the SBC's seminaries, agencies and other assets valued far in excess of \$10 billion -- as well as its long-established influences -- all to be utilized in efforts to achieve fundamentalists' nationwide secular political ambitions," said Baugh.

Baugh, a Houston layman, said he believes the conservative movement that has captured the SBC is merely the first stage of "fundamentalism's most ambitious political putsch, widespread seizure of the nation's governing bodies."

Conservatives and moderates do agree on at least one thing -- in the intervening 20 years since the Houston convention, it has become obvious that profound theological differences exist among Southern Baptists.

"It is clear there is a broad diversity in theological positions," Draper said. "We are much more conservative as a convention than many of the critics of the recent movement will admit, and we are much more liberal as a convention than we have realized in the past. We are realizing how very difficult it is to adequately cooperate across all lines when these dramatic differences exist."

Patterson observed: "Increasing numbers of moderates are admitting that there are, in fact, major theological differences between moderates and conservatives. These theological differences become more apparent with every passing year."

The reconfiguration and partial breakup of the SBC were more an exposure of such old rifts than the creation of new ones, said Bill Leonard, a Baptist historian who now is dean of the new moderate divinity school at Wake Forest University. By placing high value on cooperation and compromise, "the old Southern Baptist system kept us from serious theological discussion," he said.

While some say there is now emerging a new openness to addressing the reality of these differences, others believe the last 20 years of conflict has only strengthened the resolve of many pastors and denominational leaders to avoid the issue.

"The fact is, we are two different denominations, and both fundamentalists and traditional Baptist (moderate) leaders do not want to admit this," said Currie. "Fundamentalists do not want to admit it, because they do not want people to stop funding the SBC. Moderate leaders of state conventions do not want to admit it, because they do not want fundamentalists to stop supporting them. Therefore, we seldom say what we mean anymore, and trust has been destroyed."

Yet even some of those who disagree with the direction the SBC has taken since 1979 see a glimmer of hope in the newfound awareness of diversity in the Baptist family.

While the controversy shattered trust in the larger SBC, it created stronger bonds and fellowship within smaller networks of the convention, said Winfred Moore, an unsuccessful moderate candidate for the SBC presidency in 1985 and 1986. Since retiring as a pastor in Amarillo, Texas, Moore now directs the Center for Ministry Effectiveness at Baylor University.

"More churches today are rethinking their own autonomy and are making more of their own decision about who they are and what they want to be," Moore said. "More avenues, old ones and new ones, are open in 1999 for doing missions, education and social ministry, and there is a stronger personal commitment and involvement by local church members. More is getting done."

"As a result of what we have been through as Baptists since 1979, there is a new and wonderful sense of personal accountability being born," Moore said. "There is a resurgence of the pioneer spirit that desires more to make something grow and flourish than to control something that already is."

Others see more choppy waters yet ahead as churches, associations and conventions walk through the new Baptist landscape, which still is being shaped by social forces outside Baptist politics.

"The past is terribly regrettable," said Baugh, "and the future is dangerous."

Facing turbulent times, conservatives believe the Southern Baptist witness to Christianity has been saved and strengthened. Moderates believe it has been irreparably harmed.

"If the Lord tarries, Southern Baptists are well-positioned to preach the gospel in every nation more aggressively than ever as we enter the new millennium," said Chapman, who cited several specifics.

"The churches continue to give generously through the Cooperative Program and the regular missions offerings, even though other options are available to them," he said. "Young people in record numbers are enrolling in the six SBC seminaries. Interest in serving on the mission field continues to rise."

Chapman and others cite numerical gains in key statistics when 1999 is compared to 1979.

Yet moderates can point to recent declines in key statistical areas, including baptisms and the number of churches.

"One cause of Southern Baptists not growing is that the name of Christ has been dishonored," said Baugh, a Houston corporate executive and member of Tallowood Baptist Church. "The other result is a diminished interest to hear the gospel. We are seen as a bunch of infighting, hypocritical Baptists."

Both sides can cite numbers to back up their arguments, admitted Leonard.

"You have to look underneath that," he said. And what researchers and sociologists see underneath the numbers is that Baptists of all types are struggling with forces beyond their own theological and political battles.

"The promise was if we return to our 'roots,' the convention will be saved," Leonard said. "But the opposite has happened. The convention is coming apart. The promise that inerrancy would stall or prevent demography was never going to hold."

"That's what we know 20 years later," Leonard said. "We also know that the identity crisis is hitting the conservatives as powerfully as it is the moderates. What it means to be a Baptist is no more certain in the fundamentalist camp than in the moderate camp."

"In 1999, theology is important for identity but almost irrelevant for organizations," Leonard asserted. "The whole system is coming apart for the moderates and conservatives alike."

"Non-denominational is the word of choice for this generation of Baptists."

-30-

## **SBC's conservative movement had roots in Texas, observers say**

By Mark Wingfield

DALLAS (ABP) -- As the buckle on the Bible Belt, a place where some say there are "more Baptists than people," it should come as no surprise that Texas played a prominent role in the "conservative resurgence" of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Not only did the effort that reshaped the nation's largest non-Catholic faith group begin at the 1979 SBC meeting in Houston, but many of its key players were Texans. That has prompted some to suggest that despite national and even international scope, the conservative juggernaut had its impetus in Texas Baptist life.

Historians and other observers differ over that central question, but most agree that the SBC's largest state group formed a breeding ground for the kind of leadership needed to pull off such a massive political and theological movement.

"The fact that the major architects of the movement, Paige Patterson and Paul Pressler, and perhaps one of the main spiritual leaders, W.A. Criswell, were Texans would certainly give credence to the view that Texas was the seedbed for this," said Jesse Fletcher, chancellor of Hardin-Simmons University in Abilene and author of the SBC's 1995 sesquicentennial history.

On the other hand, "to say that Texans pulled it off by themselves would be erroneous also," Fletcher added. "But the organizing genius was born down here. You can't back too far away from Patterson, Pressler and Criswell as the three high-profile personalities in the early stages of this thing."

Both Pressler and Patterson have deep roots in Texas Baptist life. Patterson's father was executive secretary of the Baptist General Convention of Texas from 1961 to 1973. Pressler's paternal grandfather and great-grandfather both were active in Texas Baptist life, with his great-grandfather serving as a vice president of the state convention and his grandfather serving as a trustee of Baylor University. His maternal grandfather was chairman of Baylor's board for 38 of the university's first 44 years of existence.

By his own account, Pressler's concerns about the Baylor religion department in the 1960s and '70s were the catalyst for his determination to make changes in the Baptist bureaucracy.

In his new book about the SBC controversy, "A Hill on Which to Die," Pressler cites concerns about "liberal" theology he felt was being taught at Baylor.

"In 1977, five young people who had been in the youth group Nancy and I had led were freshmen at Baylor," Pressler writes. "They called me one day and said that they were confused about what to believe and wanted me to visit them in Waco. They said that the things we taught them and the things that the Bible says were different from the things that their Baylor religion professors were teaching them."

Pressler visited the students in Waco, read through their textbooks and determined the Baptist-affiliated school was teaching "higher critical" methods of Bible study, which he had encountered as a student at Princeton and found to be incompatible with his view of Scripture.

"Driving back to Houston that night from Waco, I promised God I would not sit back any longer. I would work to see our convention turned around, and I was determined to see it restored to teaching that the Bible is truly God's word," Pressler writes.

Ironically, Baylor was largely spared from Pressler's ensuing crusade to stamp out liberalism in Southern Baptist life. While his efforts eventually brought profound change at six seminaries owned by the SBC, Baylor is affiliated with the BGCT, which has resisted conservative reforms.

Baptists in the United States are organized so that state conventions, though closely linked to the national body, are technically autonomous.

Nowhere has that distinction been more evident than in Texas.

That is essential to understanding the Texas roots and Texas response to the conservative movement in the SBC, said Bill Leonard, a Baptist historian and dean of the new divinity school at Wake Forest University in North Carolina.

"I tend to distinguish between the SBC connections, particularly represented by Southwestern Seminary in Fort Worth, and the Texas Baptist connections, represented through Baylor," said Leonard, a Texas native. "The Texas Southern Baptist ethos cannot be understood apart from Southwestern and their willingness to play the game politically in the SBC."

"The state convention never paid any attention to the fundamentalists in the state," he said. "They were able to exercise their activity in the larger convention, maybe using certain Texas strategies and by playing to a conservatism Southwestern always had played to."

But what worked on the national level didn't work at home, Leonard said. "There was a conservatism in Texas that was non-negotiable. Everybody knew the leaders there were not really liberals."

To understand the dichotomy between the Texas Baptist conservatism and the kind of conservatism that now rules in the SBC, Leonard said one must remember J. Frank Norris. The controversial pastor of First Baptist Church of Fort Worth from 1909 to 1952 is considered the pre-eminent Texas fundamentalist. Norris' fiery rhetoric and inflammatory charges of liberalism at Southwestern Seminary, Baylor and the BGCT wreaked havoc in both the state and national conventions.

"Southwestern, in reacting against Norris, linked itself more closely to the national convention than to the state convention," Leonard said. "In doing that, they sowed the seeds of the future. Baylor cast its lot with the BGCT; Southwestern cast its lot with the SBC."

This distinction became pivotal in 1979, when the Pressler-Patterson coalition launched its effort to reform the SBC, Leonard said. The conservative reformers, though based in Texas, could not produce the same results in Texas as they did on the national level.

"They could not, because there was this streak in Texas which remembered Norris and which also was more Texas Baptist than Southern Baptist," he added. "Virginia and Texas were the two states in the old SBC where people most understood themselves in terms of a state identity rather than a national identity."

Baylor's leaders understood this distinction and played to it, Leonard said. "When it came time to choose, Baylor anticipated that the majority of Texas Baptists would choose Texas identity over national SBC

identity. In that sense, Baylor understood more about the Texas mentality than Southwestern. Baylor anticipated the future in Texas in a way Southwestern didn't or couldn't."

The exception to this scenario, Leonard said, is former Southwestern Seminary President Russell Dilday, who did understand the Texas ethos and its implications for the future and was fired by SBC-elected trustees as a result.

Bill Pinson, executive director of the BGCT since 1983, echoed some of Leonard's sentiments.

"When the organized political effort in the SBC began in 1979, Texas Baptists were as they had always been -- committed to the Bible as their authority, theologically conservative and focused on missions and evangelism," Pinson said. "Although in 1979 some or even many Texas Baptists may have viewed certain Southern Baptists and some SBC seminaries in the East as 'liberal,' most did not favor imposing creedal views or requiring conformity of belief on theological and social issues," he said. "Thus the call of the political leaders of the so-called 'conservative resurgence' seemed either unnecessary or dangerous to many Texas Baptists."

"The secular political activity, the character assassination, the exclusion from positions of leadership of any but those who were part of the cause, and the firing or forcing from office of persons who did not agree with their political agenda offended and even enraged many Texas Baptists," Pinson said.

Beyond Pressler, Patterson and Criswell, Texas produced many of the other key players on both sides of the SBC controversy. Three other Texans were elected to the SBC presidency on the conservative ticket: Jimmy Draper, Morris Chapman and Ed Young. Several other Texans were among the unsuccessful presidential candidates from 1979 to 1990: Robert Naylor, Abner McCall, James Pleitz, Richard Jackson, Winfred Moore and Daniel Vestal.

Vestal, former pastor of First Baptist Church of Midland, not only became the moderates' final hope of winning the presidency but after losing in 1990 also became instrumental in forming the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, the moderate splinter group he now leads.

Other Texas pastors and laymen also became prominent in the struggle, including John Baugh, a corporate executive from Houston who had crossed paths with Pressler in local-church conflicts long before most Southern Baptist ever knew either man's name. Baugh became a staunch supporter of the moderate cause and in many ways was Pressler's counterweight in devoting time, energy and money toward his cause.

These two men first met in 1961 at Second Baptist Church of Houston, where Baugh and his wife, Eula Mae, were directors of the college department in which Pressler and his wife, Nancy, became teachers.

After a period of several years, the Presslers were removed as Sunday-school teachers. In his book, Pressler says it was because church leaders disapproved of his public stand in the church against Ralph Elliott's controversial book "The Message of Genesis." Baugh said there were other reasons, including the fact that the Presslers were taking students from Sunday school at Second Baptist to worship at a Presbyterian church where they also were active.

Pressler charges in his book he raised the ire of the Baughs and a handful of other people who "ran the church" by protesting the Elliott book in a church business meeting.

Pressler's own assessment of his expulsion as a Sunday-school teacher offers an ironic foreshadowing of criticism that later would be leveled against the conservative movement he helped launch.

"What had happened seemed obvious to me," he writes. "I believe the damage control was to remove 'unsafe people' from leadership. Authority was exerted to remove anything that could cause trouble or create dissension."

## **Conservative resurgence founder tells his side of story in new book**

By Mark Wingfield

HOUSTON (ABP) -- In his new book, Paul Pressler tells a story from his childhood about uncovering a scorpion in his family's summer home, swatting it to death and burning the remains in a barbecue pit, inadvertently sparking a fire that swept across the ranch.

Pressler used the anecdote to illustrate his fastidiousness and curiosity, even as a boy. To critics of the controversial Houston judge, however, it could portend the excesses of the Southern Baptist Convention's "conservative resurgence" for which he is largely responsible.

Since he and the conservative movement burst onto the SBC scene 20 years ago, Southern Baptists have developed starkly different perceptions of the appeals-court judge who devoted himself to ridding the denomination of liberalism. Some bless him as a hero who saved the SBC; others blame him for a witch-hunt that damaged the convention and destroyed lives.

The firestorm Pressler and others started in Houston in 1979 is seen by some as a necessary purge to produce a harvest but by others as a reckless blaze that burned everything in its path.

With publication of this book, Pressler for the first time gives a public record of the conservative movement from his own perspective. The 362-page volume, titled "A Hill on Which to Die," is published by the SBC's publishing house, LifeWay Christian Resources.

The book was needed to set the record straight, Pressler writes, because so many "liberals" have unjustly attacked him and other leaders of the conservative movement. "History might not deal charitably with the conservative movement, because so many of those who write history are not sympathetic with our goals and purposes."

The title, he explains, comes from a frequent comment made by Adrian Rogers, pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church in Memphis, Tenn., and the first in a string of conservatives elected SBC president beginning in 1979.

"Frequently when we discussed a matter, Adrian Rogers would ask, 'Is this a hill on which to die?' He was inquiring as to whether this really was an important enough issue upon which to expend energy and effort."

"Conservatives worked together because we believed that the restoration of the Southern Baptist Convention to a position of standing upon the complete trustworthiness of God's word was a hill on which to die," he writes. "We were willing to make personal sacrifices because we believed this."

The book begins by tracing Pressler's family roots in Texas and Baptist life, recounting his family's historic connections to Baylor University, the Baptist General Convention of Texas, Texas politics and Houston's upper class.

As Pressler tells his story, he weaves in theological observations and encounters that became the roots for his growing concern about the threat of liberalism within the SBC. He tells about going away to school at Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire at age 16 and then to Princeton University, two places where he ran into a type of Christianity different from what he had known in south Texas.

"I considered theological liberalism an infection that was limited to the northeastern part of the country, and I longed to return to the solid, Bible-teaching ministry of Southern Baptists, where I thought everything was right and no problems existed except in some areas of North Carolina," he writes.

Upon returning to Texas, however, Pressler encountered hints of the same theology he had witnessed in full-blown form in the Northeast, he said. This perception surfaced during his search for a home church in Austin while attending the University of Texas law school. It escalated later in Houston when his church

declined to take a stand against Ralph Elliott's controversial "Message of Genesis" book published by the SBC Sunday School Board.

The bulk of Pressler's book describes his views on the 15-year battle for control of the SBC that he and others launched in 1979, as well as the steps that led to the movement's start.

Among the issue he discusses are:

-- Texas as the last great threat for an SBC split. In a chapter on the future of the SBC, Pressler admits that his own state convention has failed to follow the new direction of the SBC. He laments that the Baptist General Convention of Texas has redefined its Cooperative Program to include causes other than those controlled by SBC conservatives.

"I worry that the next step will be to end the geographical limitations on membership in the Texas convention so that liberal churches throughout the country can join," he writes. "The BGCT then could change its name, and a new liberal denomination would be established using its assets. What the CBF could not do, the taking of the assets of the BGCT would accomplish. To me this is the last major threat of a meaningful split in the SBC."

-- Moderates' claim that they have been "disenfranchised" from the SBC by being denied any leadership positions. "This implies that we took away their right to vote," he writes. "Of course, this is not correct."

-- International Mission Board President Jerry Rankin. Pressler reports that as a trustee of the IMB (then called the Foreign Mission Board) in 1993, he was one of 14 who voted against Rankin's nomination as president. It was primarily because he was not convinced Rankin would be firm enough theologically and administratively to carry out the wishes of conservative leaders.

However, Pressler says his opinion of Rankin has changed entirely. "As time has passed and I have grown to know him and observe his leadership, I am very pleased with Jerry Rankin as president. He is doctrinally astute and has been greatly used of God in making necessary fundamental changes both in personnel and in procedures."

-- The gathering attended by him and Paige Patterson and other conservative leaders at Cafe du Monde in New Orleans during the 1990 SBC annual meeting. This party was portrayed in several news accounts as a victory celebration for conservatives at the site where Pressler and Patterson first met in the 1960s to talk about their mutual concerns about the SBC.

It was not a victory celebration, Pressler writes, but merely a get-together of like-minded people. "The event was unorganized except for free tickets for coffee, hot chocolate and beignets."

-- The operation of the SBC Executive Committee when he first began serving as a member in 1984. "It appeared to me that the Executive Committee was tightly controlled by a small group who worked out what action should be taken on all matters presented to it," he writes. "Only in rare instances did the membership speak up sufficiently to cause a different result."

-- His reception when elected to the Executive Committee. "Most members received me in an extremely chilly manner, not with the friendship for which I had hoped."

-- His ill-fated nomination by President George Bush to serve as president of the Office of Government Ethics. After learning from the White House that "a great deal of unkind comment" was registered against him while his nomination was under consideration, Pressler writes, he determined it would be best to decline the nomination. He does not elaborate on the nature of the unkind comments, but blames the secular press and the "liberal movement within the SBC" as co-conspirators.

-- His 1980 comment that conservatives needed to "go for the jugular" in their fight for control. "The use of this metaphor was very unwise, as I would later learn. The Baptist news writers seized on this to make me look like an angry monster."

Press reports and editorials about this comment "took my quote out of context and made it appear that I was seeking to destroy individuals," he suggests.

-- How moderates and traditionalists could have stopped the conservative movement early on. Pressler notes that the central strategy of the conservatives was to gain control of the presidency and then give their own interpretation to a vague requirement that the president appoint members of the committee on committees "in conference" with the two vice presidents.

Even though conservatives were elected president from 1979 on, moderates continued to be elected to the vice presidential posts for several years.

"Had I been planning strategy for the liberals, I would have asked the SBC Executive Committee to define the term while the liberals still had absolute control of the Executive Committee. Had any official definition of 'conference' existed that gave an equal voice to each of the vice presidents along with the president, the conservative movement could have been stopped."

-- The skyboxes at the 1979 Houston convention. In the year the conservative movement launched its plan to gain control of the SBC presidency, Pressler arranged for use of several skyboxes in The Summit, where he provided refreshments for conservative messengers during the convention sessions.

Pressler's critics charged these skyboxes were being used for caucuses in a way that is specifically forbidden in the SBC's Constitution. Pressler argues that what was going on in the skyboxes was not caucusing, and he wasn't directing any organized effort from there.

He had obtained use of the skyboxes from friends who were executives of the Houston companies that owned them, he writes. "Overlooked in the controversy was the fact that other skyboxes could have been available for any other group for the asking had others wanted them and the owners given permission."

-- His disappointment with the attitudes of others. He cites some people who became "double agents" in the struggle. "They appeared to be friendly to our cause but then passed on information to the establishment. I had hoped in Christian circles that believers would be straightforward and honest. How naive I was! To watch Christians acting this way through the years has been disappointing and has hurt me deeply."

-30-

**END**

---