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Auto crash kills Baptist journalist

By Bob Allen

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- A veteran denominational journalist once hailed as a hero for press freedom in the Southern Baptist Convention died July 23 from injuries sustained in a car accident.

Al Shackleford, 68, was the lone fatality in an afternoon head-on collision involving three cars on a two-lane state highway not far from his home in Franklin, Tenn. His wife, Tommye, and daughter, Dee Cochran, were hospitalized. Two grandchildren also in the car, Ben Cochran, 4, and his 2-year-old sister, Rachel, were not seriously injured.

The Tennessee Highway Patrol said several passengers in one of the other vehicles were also hurt, but none fatally.

Shackleford's career as a Baptist journalist spanned more than 40 years, but he was best known for being fired 10 years ago as director of Baptist Press, the SBC's official news service.

In a dramatic closed-door meeting secured by armed guards, the SBC Executive Committee voted July 17, 1990, to fire, without cause, both Shackleford, the vice president in charge of Baptist Press, and Dan Martin, the service's news editor.

While supporters of the firing said the two journalists were biased against conservatives, others called the move an effort to censor the denomination's news. A few weeks earlier, Martin reportedly refused to kill a story containing comments critical of a powerful Executive Committee member. Shackleford backed up the decision, and both refused to resign in an effort to head off their firing.

The firings prompted the formation of Associated Baptist Press, an independent news service. Shackleford was a founding member of ABP's board of directors, serving about two years before resigning.

Greg Warner, executive editor of the decade-old news service now located in Jacksonville, Fla., said: "This is a tremendous loss for all of us who were privileged to know Al. He was one of the gentlest and truest of souls who became the undeserving target of denominational zeal and vitriol. Yet through it all, his tender heart and purity of calling reminded us what is truly important in life. We will always remember what Al contributed to the founding of ABP but, more importantly, what he taught us about the spirit of Christ."

After his firing at Baptist Press, Shackleford went nearly two years unable to find steady work, including 10 months where he earned \$4.60 an hour as a clerk at a Kroger store.

Eventually, he was hired by the SBC's publishing arm, LifeWay Christian Resources, as editor-in-chief of *Mature Living*, a monthly magazine for senior adults. He reportedly planned to retire later this year.

LifeWay President Jimmy Draper, who offered him the job eight years ago, said Shackleford "did a superb job as editor of *Mature Living*."

"I loved and appreciated Al for many reasons, including his strong belief system and commitment to the truth of God's word," Draper said. "I know I speak for all who knew and worked with him when I say we

will miss him greatly and are praying for his family as they deal with their grief and for the healing of those injured in the accident."

Shackleford worked just more than three years at Baptist Press, after being narrowly elected to the position in February 1987. He went there after 11 years as editor of the Tennessee Baptist newsjournal Baptist and Reflector and 11 years before that as editor of the Indiana Baptist.

Tom Madden, who was the Tennessee Baptist Convention's executive director during most of Shackleford's tenure there, commented: "I always felt Al was called to be a journalist. He represented both sides of an issue to the best of his ability. He was a supporter of all Baptist causes. I enjoyed working with him and feel a distinct personal loss."

Harold Bennett, former president of the SBC Executive Committee and Shackleford's supervisor at Baptist Press, described him as "one of the most gracious and skilled workers in Southern Baptist life." Shackleford worked for Baptist Press "hard and diligently and with great integrity," Bennett said.

Fletcher Allen, who succeeded Shackleford as editor of the Tennessee newspaper, called Shackleford "a kindred spirit" whom he admired for "his high moral standards" and his commitment to his church, Brentwood Baptist Church, and family. "He was one of my mentors and it was an honor to follow him as editor of the B and R," said Allen, who is now retired.

Lonnie Wilkey, the paper's current editor, wrote in this week's editorial: "Al Shackleford leaves behind a legacy that should encourage those who knew him well. He faced adversity head-on and continued his walk with the Lord. He was faithful to the end."

Dan Martin, the other fired Baptist Press editor, now works as a news writer for the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

A native of Franklin, Ga., Shackleford was a graduate of Mercer University in Macon, Ga., the University of Georgia in Athens, and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas.

Tommye Shackleford was released July 24 from Vanderbilt Medical Center. Dee Cochran was taken to Williamson Medical Center and was expected to be released July 25.

Arrangements were incomplete at press time, but funeral services were tentatively set for Wednesday afternoon, July 26.

In addition to his wife, injured daughter and the two grandchildren, Shackleford is survived by another daughter, Tina Shackleford of Iowa City, Iowa; a brother, Nat Shackleford of Carrollton, Ga.; and a son-in-law, Bill Cochran.

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-- Terri Lackey and Lonnie Wilkey contributed to this story.

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