



# Associated Baptist Press

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### Partisan rancor in Missouri reaches new heights in 2001

By Bob Allen

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (ABP) -- Rancor between moderates and conservatives was noticeably absent in some of the Southern Baptist Convention's state and regional affiliates this fall. In other state conventions, however, it reached new heights.

Nowhere was the latter more clear than in Missouri. Conservatives controlling the Missouri Baptist Convention, angered by the defection of several moderate-led agencies to move to self-perpetuating trustee boards in the last year, voted to hold in escrow \$2 million earmarked for five entities and prepared to go to court, if necessary, to recover their control.

In separate action Oct. 30-31 in Cape Girardeau, Missouri Baptists unseated messengers from Second Baptist Church in Liberty because the church voted to leave the Southern Baptist Convention. A credentials committee said the state convention constitution requires member churches to also belong to the SBC. Critics of the vote disputed the committee's interpretation.

While some moderate-led state conventions have said churches may relate to them without supporting the national denomination, Missouri becomes the first major state convention to formally require loyalty to the conservative-led SBC.

The vote renewed talk among moderate Baptists of forming an alternative state convention. Disgruntled conservatives have previously taken that step in moderate strongholds in Virginia and Texas, but Missouri would become home to the first moderate breakaway convention in Southern Baptists' two-decade-old power struggle.

Other highlights from 2001 Baptist state conventions include the following.

ARKANSAS -- Arkansas Baptists passed a resolution denouncing Harry Potter, saying the popular children's book series promotes pagan beliefs and practices.

Meeting Nov. 6-7 in Russellville, the Arkansas Baptist State Convention approved the resolution, which states in part, "We will firmly denounce and speak out against any books or materials that promote witchcraft, sorcery and the casting of spells and the making of charms and specifically the Harry Potter book series and subsequent materials."

In other business, the convention elected conservatives to three convention offices and took the first of two votes to establish the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message" as the convention's doctrinal guide.

CALIFORNIA -- California Southern Baptists focused on unity and worship absent any controversy in their Nov. 13-14 gathering in Bakersfield. Business items included a record budget and the re-election of convention officers by acclamation.

FLORIDA -- The Florida Baptist State Convention changed its constitution to allow the president to serve a second one-year term. Currently, the president is ineligible for re-election. An official recommending the change said it would help leaders leave a greater mark on the state convention's work.

The convention elected Orlando-area pastor Dwayne Mercer as president for the coming year. Mercer, 47, pastor of the 4,500-member First Baptist Church of Oviedo, one of the convention's top financial contributors, was unopposed.

GEORGIA -- The Georgia Baptist Convention passed a resolution calling for a ban on human cloning for any reason. The statement, adopted at the Nov. 12-13 meeting in Macon, called for limiting stem-cell research to "ethically responsible sources," such as adult stem cells.

Wayne Robertson, pastor of Morningside Baptist Church in Valdosta, easily won the convention presidency over Montezuma layman Preston Williams in a meeting characterized as harmonious.

ILLINOIS -- Anticipating a polarized state convention this year, the Illinois Baptist State Convention backed off of confrontation over several controversial items at a Nov. 7-8 meeting in Peoria.

Some disagreement erupted in discussion of a motion to affirm six statements of faith -- the Baptist Faith and Message of 1925 and its three revisions in 1963, 1998 and 2000 as well as two earlier confessions of faith. Eventually, however, the motion passed overwhelmingly.

After that, a constitution-and-bylaws committee pulled the first reading of an amendment making the "2000 Baptist Faith and Message" the official statement of faith of the Illinois Baptist State Association. The committee said it needed more time to study the matter in light of the previous action.

After that, a resolutions committee agreed to withdraw a proposed statement on unity, which some found more divisive than unifying.

Observers attributed the goodwill, following months of politicking by competing factions, at least in part to uncertainty stemming from the recent resignation of Bob Wiley as the state's executive director.

INDIANA -- Meeting for the first time in the northeast part of the state, the State Convention of Baptists in Indiana honored Executive Director Charles Sullivan for 10 years of service. Osceola was site of the Oct. 30-31 convention.

KENTUCKY -- Avoiding an up-or-down vote on controversial doctrines in the most recent edition of the "Baptist Faith and Message," Kentucky Baptists adopted a report acknowledging "value" of faith statements while terming the Bible "the basis for all our faith and practice."

The report followed a yearlong study by a committee charged with recommending how the Kentucky Baptist Convention "can best relate" to the "Baptist Faith and Message" as adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention in 2000.

The nine-member committee came up with a compromise recommendation to "acknowledge the value" of a series of historic Baptist confessions of faith including both the 1963 and 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message."

Messengers at the state convention's annual meeting Nov. 13-14 in Murray overwhelmingly approved the committee's report.

LOUISIANA -- Louisiana Baptists underscored support of the SBC Cooperative Program and affirmed biblical inerrancy in resolutions adopted during their Nov. 12-13 annual meeting in Westwego.

Outlining the history and effectiveness of Southern Baptists' 76-year-old Cooperative Program, the CP resolution noted that some individuals have redirected support from the giving channel and "are seeking to influence churches to redirect their Cooperative Program giving to alternate and competing giving programs designed to undermine and replace the work of existing Southern Baptist agencies, seminaries and mission boards."

The resolution concerning the Bible noted that Baptists always have believed it to be the "holy, inspired, written Word of God."

"Doubters of God's Word have manipulated definitions of words such as 'infallible,' 'perfect' and 'true' to allege falsehood in the Bible or to claim the Bible to be true in one area of knowledge and not in others," the resolution continued.

In response, the resolution declared "that the Bible is inerrant, infallible, true, trustworthy, without mixture of error and that, singularly or together, these words mean that every statement and word of the Scripture is absolutely accurate concerning every field of knowledge it discusses."

MISSISSIPPI -- Mississippi Baptists elected veteran pastor and former seminary president Frank Pollard as their convention president, honoring his retirement planned at the end of this year.

"I don't deserve this at all, but I deeply appreciate it," Pollard told messengers to the Oct. 30-31 Mississippi Baptist Convention after his election. "I thank you all for the opportunity to serve you."

Pollard, 67, has been pastor at First Baptist Church in Jackson for more than 21 years. He is a former president of Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary in Mill Valley, Calif.

NORTH CAROLINA -- After two years of work on a failed shared-leadership initiative, the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina once again squared off in contested officer elections.

Conservatives took two of three offices up for grabs at the Nov. 13-14 convention in Winston-Salem, including the presidency. Conservative-backed Jerry Pereira, pastor of First Baptist Church of Swannanoa, was elected president over Beaufort layman Raymond Earp by a margin of 54 percent to 46 percent.

In other business, North Carolina Baptists all but ended ties with two historically Baptist educational institutions, Wake Forest University and Meredith College, over disagreements with decisions made by the schools' trustees.

OKLAHOMA -- The Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma conducted routine business, including adoption of a resolution reaffirming ties with the Southern Baptist Convention. Anthony Jordan, executive director of the state convention, commended Oklahoma Baptists for their unity in an era when Baptists in other states are torn by factions. "Our pattern in Oklahoma is to pray for the Lord's leadership, rather than politicking for our person or party," Jordan said.

SOUTH CAROLINA -- South Carolina Baptists approved resolutions urging prayers for America, opposing a state lottery and embryonic stem-cell research, supporting public displays of the Ten Commandments and affirming the Southern Baptist Convention and its 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message."

Meeting Nov. 13-14 in Columbia, the South Carolina Baptist Convention was marked by a unified but conservative tone. The only debate surrounded the resolution endorsing the "Baptist Faith and Message," as messengers defeated a motion to defer the matter until next year for additional study.

TENNESSEE -- An expanded committee studying whether to increase powers of the president of the Tennessee Baptist Convention will continue its work for a second year.

Outgoing TBC president Hollie Miller, who appointed the special committee to study the role and effectiveness of the state convention president, said the committee had found that Tennessee is the only Southern Baptist state convention not giving its president authority to make appointments to key leadership posts but needed more time to find out why.

In a setback to conservatives hoping the study would expedite their efforts to control state convention governing boards, however, an amendment passed expanding the current committee to include all former state convention presidents still living in Tennessee. Some of those former presidents have publicly opposed increasing the office's power.

TEXAS -- In a meeting marked with little dissent, the Baptist General Convention of Texas declined to affirm the 2000 version of the "Baptist Faith and Message." Last year the convention affirmed an earlier version of the Southern Baptist Convention faith statement adopted in 1963 but said it differs with changes in the revised edition.

The Oct. 29-30 convention in Dallas attracted 3,313 messengers, the smallest crowd since 1979, when controversy between moderates and conservatives erupted in the SBC.

Meeting nearby, a rival state convention, the Southern Baptists of Texas Convention, marked its third year by reporting rapid growth. Registration topped 1,000 for the first time, and the number of affiliated churches reached 900.

The convention poked jabs at the BGCT's moderate leadership, including the passage of a resolution affirming Baptist Press, the SBC news service accused of targeting the state convention for negative reporting.

VIRGINIA -- The Baptist General Association of Virginia elected a new executive director and gave a formal send off to an old one. John Upton, 48, who has worked for the Virginia Baptist Mission Board six years, takes over March 1, when current executive Reginald McDonough retires after 15 years.

An alternative conservative Virginia Baptist convention, meanwhile, celebrated its fifth anniversary by reporting steady growth.

"We are but one or two generations from returning Virginia to its conservative biblical roots," said Doyle Chauncey, the executive director/treasurer of the Southern Baptist Conservatives of Virginia.

With 45 new churches, including 16 newly "planted" congregations, SBCV now totals 334 churches, 286 of which are uniquely aligned.

WEST VIRGINIA -- The West Virginia Convention of Southern Baptists were introduced to a new executive director elected just prior to their Nov. 2-3 annual meeting in Parkersburg.

Terry Harper, pastor of Colonial Heights Baptist Church in Colonial Heights, Va., since 1984, assumes the post Dec. 1. A conservative who said he believes the Bible is "inerrant" and "infallible," he is a past president of Southern Baptist Conservatives of Virginia, a breakaway convention from the moderate-led Baptist General Association of Virginia.

Other state conventions including Alaska and Utah-Idaho reaffirmed SBC ties and endorsed recent revisions to the "Baptist Faith and Message."

Hawaii Baptists defeated a proposed constitutional amendment to change the convention statement of faith from the "Baptist Faith and Message, 1963 version" to "any version that has been adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention." An alternate amendment to change the wording of the statement of faith to "The Baptist Faith and Message as adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention" was tabled.

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## **Tolkien insisted 'Lord of the Rings' was based on Christian beliefs**

By Craig Bird

ASHEVILLE, N.C. (ABP) -- On the heels of the Harry Potter movie, with magical themes that some criticize as unchristian, another popular fantasy novel is about to hit the big screen.

The anticipated blockbuster "The Fellowship of the Ring" is expected to take the already legendary renown of author J.R.R. Tolkien to another level. Scheduled to hit theaters Dec. 19, it is the first installment of an ambitious attempt to translate Tolkien's classic "Lord of the Rings" series in film.

New Line Pictures reportedly budgeted \$50 million to promote the first installment. Next year will see the premiere of "The Two Towers," followed by "The Return of the King" in 2003.

It continues an unlikely prominence for a conservative Oxford don who made up entire languages for his private amusement.

In fact, he wound up writing "The Hobbit," the prequel to "Lord of the Rings," after encountering a blank page while grading exams. He impulsively jotted down, "In a hole in the ground, there lived a hobbit." Not knowing what a "hobbit" was, he wrote an entire novel to answer his own question.

Tolkien's three-volume set has sold more than 50 million copies since publication of the first volume in 1954. A special edition released by Houghton Mifflin this year has sold 250,000 copies so far.

Tolkien, who died in 1973, despised machines. He only briefly owned an automobile and never a dishwasher. One must wonder what he would make of the high-tech special effects that pervade director Peter Jackson's film version of "The Fellowship of the Ring."

Another question is how audiences that objected to mythical themes in Harry Potter will receive similar fare in Tolkien's writings. While Tolkien was politically conservative and a devout Christian, his works have been subject of broad interpretation by various groups. For example:

- Songs by the popular rock band Led Zeppelin in the 1970s borrowed images from Tolkien. The Hobbit habit of ingesting mushrooms and smoking "pipe weed" got translated into drug use for counter-culture readers.

- Symphonies have performed "In Memoriam Tolkien," a composition by Stan McDaniel, philosophy professor emeritus from Sonoma State University. McDaniel also received a "doctor of honorary hobbit" degree for an article he wrote about linguistic arguments that Tolkien paid conscious homage to nature worship.

- White supremacists appeal to "Lord of the Rings" on the Internet, apparently attracted by allusions to Germanic-Norse gods.

- Stephan Hoeller of the Los Angeles Gnostic Society put Tolkien on level with the Bible in leading to spiritual salvation.

- Many academics find the psychological work of Carl Jung illustrated in the storyline, while others prefer a Freudian interpretation.

- American Mensa, the high-IQ society, offers a monthly newsletter on Tolkien.

- Thousands of Web sites are devoted to Tolkien's trilogy, including reports on Russians role playing in the Ural Mountains, Norwegians reading the book on the radio and Dutch fans staging dragon fights.

Often overlooked, meanwhile, is the subtle Christian message underlying Tolkien's fiction.

In fact, Tolkien persuaded C.S. Lewis, who himself later wrote several Christian classics, to become a Christian. The two are credited with paving the way for a new genre of devotional literature, influencing authors like Charles Williams, T.S. Eliot, G.K. Chesterton and Dorothy Sayers.

Tolkien omitted overt references to God, worship, prayer and Christianity in the 500,000 words of the "Lord of the Rings" trilogy. It wasn't an effort to hide his Christian faith, he said. Rather, he believed the technique communicated Christian values more effectively precisely because they were less obvious.

According to Tolkien and his close associates, the writings were grounded in an unstinting Christian conviction that, at the end of time, God would finally and forever defeat evil.

Tolkien rooted that conviction in his own faith in Christ.

Tolkien said that the only criticism of "Lord of the Rings" that ever bothered him, "was that it contained no religion."

He described his fictional Middle Earth as "a monotheistic world of 'natural theology.'"

The fact there are no churches, temples or religious rites and ceremonies "is simply part of the historical climate depicted" in his fiction, he said.

"I am in any case myself a Christian," he said, even if his "Third Age" was not a Christian world.

Tolkien believed that eternal truths established in creation would be recognizable even in his fictional "sub creation."

"We have come from God and inevitably the myths woven by us, though they contain error, will also reflect a splintered fragment of the true light, the eternal truth which is with God," he told C.S. Lewis during their late night discussion that resulted in Lewis becoming a Christian.

More insights into the hidden spiritual currents that drive Tolkien's work are found in an acclaimed but lesser-known work, "The Silmarillion."

The bible of Tolkien's mythical world recounts millennia of history, along with the mythological structure of Middle Earth, including an all-powerful deity, angelic beings and a version of "the fall" of some of those beings.

The deeper framework allows Tolkien to explore profound questions of destiny and free will, the reality of evil and the task to struggle against it.

"The 'Hobbit' and 'Lord of the Rings' seem like Cliff Notes compared to 'The Silmarillion,'" said Taylor Hanson, a law student and recent graduate of Samford University. She said the book, while difficult, interlaces Christianity with fantasy in a way that makes it essential to fully understanding "The Lord of the Rings."

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-- Craig Bird is a free-lance writer in Asheville, N.C. This story is an abridged version of a story in FaithWorks magazine.

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