



Bellevue Baptist Church in Cordova, Tennessee is one of many large churches affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention.

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## Southern Baptists

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Baptists originated as a religious body in seventeenth-century England as a result of the Separatist movement. Puritans who believed in the principle of adult immersion in water as a confession of faith and espoused freedom of conscience and individual interpretation of the Bible, the Baptists (sometimes called Anabaptists) separated from the Church of England. Over the years, many sects formed, often on the basis of differences over theological and social issues.

Although there were a few Baptists among the early settlers of the American colonies, the first Baptist Church in what is now the United States was established by Roger Williams, a great proponent of religious liberty and of the separation of church and state, who, after being expelled from Massachusetts, established a congregation in Rhode Island in 1635.

During the Great Awakening of the eighteenth century, Baptists became a major American denomination. By 1800, there were more than 1200 churches organized in several associations, the largest of which was the Baptist General Convention.

In 1845, as a result of anti-slavery sentiment in the Baptist General Convention, churches in slave-holding states withdrew to form the Southern Baptist Convention, which cited biblical passages in defense of slavery. It has since grown to become the largest Protestant denomination in the United States, numbering about 16,000,000 members.

It has also come to be known as the most intolerant of the major American religious denominations, especially (but not exclusively) for its opposition to equal rights for gay men and lesbians.

### **Southern Baptist Fundamentalists**

Because of the traditional Baptist belief in the individual conscience and in the individual's interpretation of the Bible, as well as a tradition of granting a great deal of autonomy to congregations, there was until the 1980s a wide range of beliefs among Southern Baptist members and congregations about social issues and theology.

However, after a prolonged and bitter struggle within the denomination between fundamentalists and relative moderates, the conservative fundamentalists emerged victorious and have proceeded to impose their will on the denomination as a whole, firing dissenting professors at denomination-supported colleges, universities, and seminaries; purging moderates from the denominational hierarchy; and expelling congregations that disagree with their interpretations of the Bible or that bless same-sex unions or appoint gay men as deacons.

Before the takeover of the denomination by fundamentalists, Baptists were great supporters of the separation of church and state, being leery of secular politics and wary of the government's intervention in matters of the spirit. Now, however, Southern Baptists are politically active and form an important

constituency of the New Right, especially in organizations such as the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition.

### **Southern Baptists and Homosexuality**

While most Baptists, even those not associated with the Southern Baptist Convention, tend to be conservative on social matters and tend to interpret certain biblical passages as condemnatory of homosexuality, only with the takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention by the fundamentalists have Baptists become especially noted for their hostility to--and obsession with--glbtq causes and people.

Not only do Southern Baptists accept as literally true the Biblical condemnations of homosexuality, but they have also declared that homosexuality is a "*manifestation of a depraved nature and a perversion of divine standards.*" In addition, in increasingly shrill tones, they have linked homosexual behavior to a general moral decline in America and have declared homosexuality a threat to the traditional family, which they see as ordained by God "as the foundational institution of human society."

In the eyes of Southern Baptists, homosexuality, while not "the unpardonable sin," is particularly abhorrent to God, inherently sinful, and "outside the will of God." They believe that homosexuality is caused by unhealthy relationships between children and parents and that homosexuals can change their sexual orientation. Hence, Southern Baptists have been in the forefront of supporting and promoting the "ex-gay movement" and reparative therapy.

Finally, and not surprisingly, Southern Baptists believe it is proper to discriminate against homosexuals in employment and other areas in order to protect the family and other social institutions.

The Southern Baptist Convention's Washington-based Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission lobbies against glbtq rights and maintains a website full of highly dubious "facts" about homosexuality and glbtq people.

### **Resolutions Concerning glbtq Issues**

At their annual meeting, Southern Baptists regularly adopt resolutions on political and religious issues. In recent years, many of these have focused on glbtq issues.

In 1993, the delegates to the Southern Baptist Convention adopted a resolution reproving newly elected President Clinton and Vice President Gore, both of whom are practicing Southern Baptists, for their efforts in ending discrimination against homosexuals.

In 1996, the delegates to the annual meeting overwhelmingly adopted a resolution threatening a boycott of the Walt Disney Corporation unless Disney changed its gay-friendly employment policies. When the corporation refused to alter its policies, the 1997 meeting voted to implement the boycott.

Despite the manifest failure of their boycott of Disney, the 1998 meeting passed more anti-gay resolutions, including one that expressed opposition to any attempt of the government to provide "endorsement, sanction, recognition, acceptance or civil rights advantage on the basis of homosexuality."

In 1999, the delegates at the annual meeting passed resolutions attacking American Airlines for having contributed to the Human Rights Campaign, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance against Defamation, and Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG); they also rebuked President Clinton for having issued "a historic proclamation designating a 'Gay and Lesbian Pride Month'" and demanded that he withdraw his appointment of an openly gay man, James Hormel, as ambassador to Luxembourg. They also reaffirmed their assertion that homosexuals can be converted to heterosexuality through belief in Jesus.

In 2000, the annual meeting amended the Southern Baptist Convention's *Baptist Faith and Message* manual

to call upon all Christians "to oppose all forms of sexual immorality, including . . . homosexuality." At the same meeting, delegates approved a resolution congratulating talk-show host Laura Schlesinger for her opposition to homosexuals.

At that same convention, the delegates voted to prohibit their ordained women ministers from acting as pastors and reaffirmed the duty of wives to be submissive to their husbands.

### **The Response to Southern Baptist Extremism**

In response to the actions taken at the 2000 convention, President Jimmy Carter announced that "I have finally decided that, after 65 years, I can no longer be associated with the Southern Baptist Convention," adding that the denomination has adopted policies "that violate the basic premises of my Christian faith."

The extremism of Southern Baptists in social and political matters and its reputation for intolerance have prompted many congregations to abandon their affiliation with the Southern Baptist Convention. Some of these congregations, such as Pullen Memorial Baptist Church of Raleigh, North Carolina, and University Baptist Church of Austin, Texas, were expelled from the Southern Baptist Convention because of their relatively progressive stances on the issue of homosexuality; but many others have voluntarily left to affiliate with other associations, such as the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, the Baptist Alliance, and the Mainstream Network.

These moderate organizations are not themselves liberal on glbtq issues, but they attempt to return to the Baptist principles of individual conscience and congregational autonomy, and they tend not to take extreme positions on social issues.

### **Conclusion**

Like most evangelical Christian denominations, Southern Baptists tend to interpret the Bible literally and to rely on a handful of biblical passages to justify their conviction that homosexuality is sinful. Unlike most other evangelical Christian denominations, however, Southern Baptists have become aggressively anti-gay and have flexed their considerable political muscle to oppose glbtq civil rights.

As a significant constituency of the New Right, Southern Baptists are politically active on the local, state, and federal levels. Because of the enormous resources they provide to the fight against equal rights for glbtq people, they must be counted among the most implacable enemies of the American movement for equality.

At the same time, however, the denomination's leaders' penchant for extremism increasingly isolates them from their own members. It is unlikely, for example, that the majority of rank-and-file Southern Baptists actually observed the boycott against Disney. Still, as the largest Protestant denomination in the United States, the Southern Baptist Convention exercises a great deal of influence, especially in the American South.

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