

LIGHT



Summer 2023
Volume 9, Issue 1



YOUR ERLC: ASSISTING CHURCHES. SPEAKING TO THE PUBLIC SQUARE.

Representing Southern Baptists in the Public Square



THE ETHICS & RELIGIOUS
LIBERTY COMMISSION
OF THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONVENTION

Learn more at [ERLC.com/join](https://www.ERLC.com/join)

What's In a Name?

MINISTRY AT THE INTERSECTION OF FAITH AND CULTURE

The Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission stands at the beginning of a new era.

Currently, an ideology of extreme individualism, coupled with a wave of loneliness and despair, is coursing through our society. We see this in the breakdown of institutional life, the atomization of culture, and the reality that meaningful relationships are being tested and even failing to be formed.

In Baptist life, cooperation is being strained. Each day seems to bring new events, legal matters, and moments that are challenging us. However, as a Christ follower, I am never without hope. While our convention is being tested right now, my discussions with pastors lead me to believe we can get through this hour—and be the better for it. There is an appetite for association, a call for cooperation, and a renewed belief in the Baptist view of the world. And that is where this Commission has a unique role to play.

WHAT OUR NAME MEANS FOR OUR CHURCHES

There's a theme communicated by the very name of this organization. While this entity is over 100 years old, that name is rather new. Given to us in 1997, every word is just as important now as it was then:

- *Ethics* applies the moral demands of the gospel to the cultural questions and challenges of the day.
- *Religious liberty* believes a “free church in a free state is the ideal;” this principle is essential for spreading the gospel because no one can be coerced into the Kingdom of God.

These twin priorities are robust and challenging. Yet, I am increasingly convinced the most important word in our name is “and.” *And* is the bridge that shows these two concepts are inextricably linked. We don't sacrifice one for

the other. I believe this framing is essential to the work carried out by our team:

- *It means we operate at the intersection of faith and culture.*
- *It means we tell the state that it has a God-ordained responsibility to protect the most vulnerable from the abortionist's knife and the drugmaker's chemicals.*
- *It means we remind the Church she must be a refuge for the abused and marginalized, for those preyed upon by the sexual revolution in our culture, and those preyed upon within our walls.*
- *It means we remind the state of the proper limits of its authority when it tramples the consciences of citizens or seeks to overturn the fundamental and biological truths of what it means to be a man, woman, or, very soon now, a human.*
- *And it means we continue to walk alongside our churches as we pursue true racial unity.* This convention has come so far, yet our work is far from finished.

In all this, I speak clearly because our churches have done so. The ERLC will always take care to listen to our churches and help them, which will ensure that this Commission continues to bring a deep, abiding, consistent, and thoroughly Baptist voice to the public square. And that is our foremost aim: *Render assistance to our churches and, from that service, speak to a watching world.*

As we do, we will build on the work of the past and meet the demands of the times; fulfill the assignment given by our churches; and do all we can to bring honor and glory to the name and saving grace of Jesus Christ in a dark public square.



BRENT LEATHERWOOD
PRESIDENT, ERLC



THE ERLC WILL ALWAYS TAKE CARE TO LISTEN TO OUR CHURCHES AND HELP THEM, WHICH WILL ENSURE THAT THIS COMMISSION CONTINUES TO BRING A DEEP, ABIDING, CONSISTENT, AND THOROUGHLY BAPTIST VOICE TO THE PUBLIC SQUARE.

COMMENTARY

10 **"A Champion of the Christian Way in Race Relations"**

AMY WHITFIELD

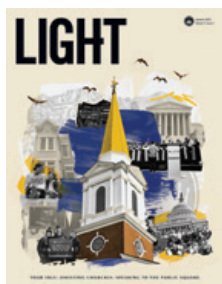
Brooks Hays was a statesman of the Southern Baptist Convention and an important figure of the ERLC's trustee board. Amy Whitfield paints a picture of his life and legacy.

14 **For the Love of Christ and Love of Others** MEREDITH FLYNN

Eunie Smith was the first female chair of the ERLC's board of trustees. Meredith Flynn shows how her life of public service has been fueled by her faith.

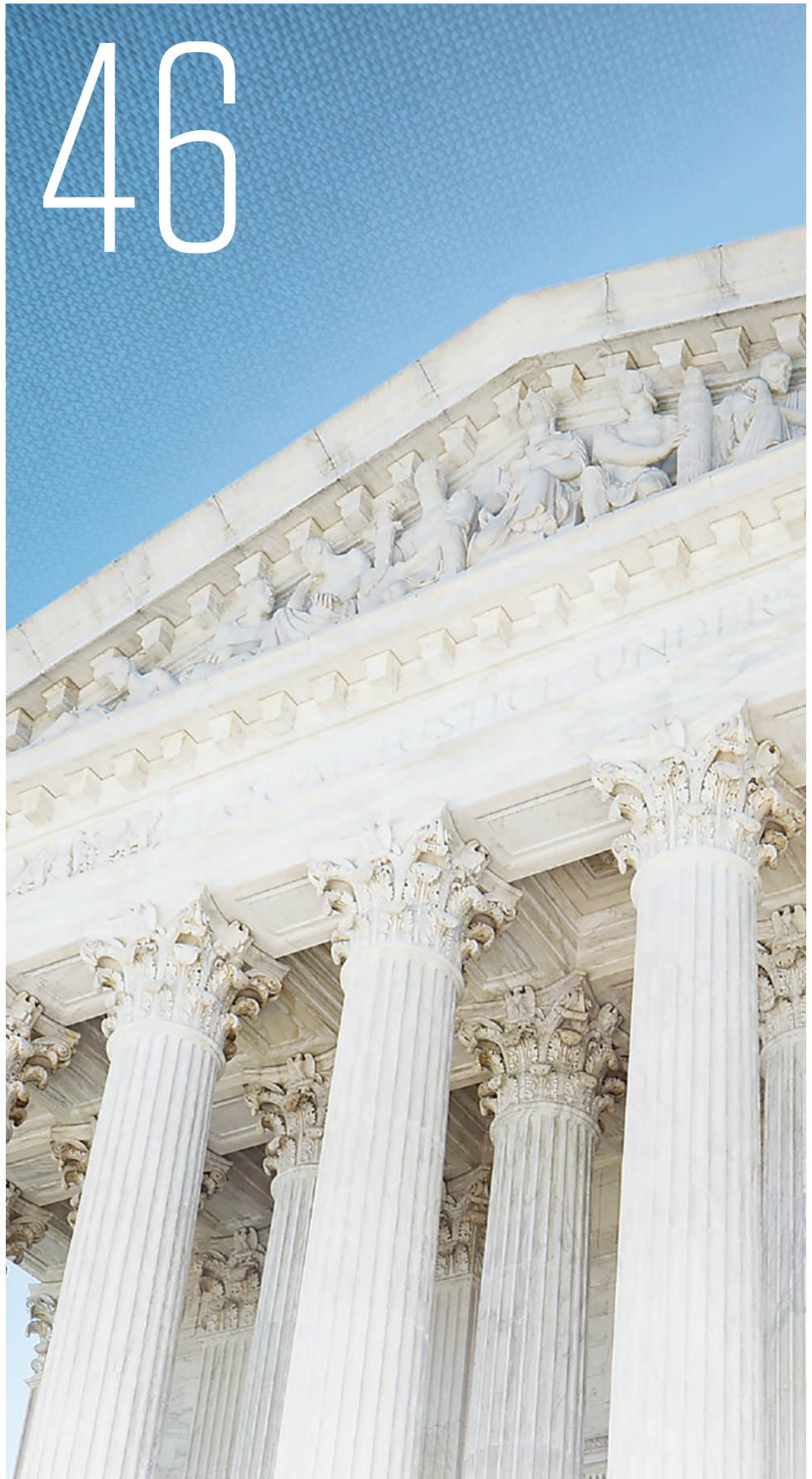
ALSO IN THIS ISSUE

- 07 From The Editor
- 09 Book Review
- 30 Major Events in the History of the ERLC
- 52 Resources



On the cover, designer Jacob Blaze highlights key moments in the history of the ERLC.

46



Cover SBC building and Capitol speech photos provided by the Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Nashville, Tennessee.

SPOTLIGHT

16 SERIES: THE ERLC'S WORK THROUGH THE YEARS

18 **Standing in the Gap for Human Dignity** CHELSEA SOBOLIK

What links the ERLC's work on racial unity, gambling, and immigration? Chelsea Sobolik conveys how the truth of human dignity undergirds this advocacy.

21 **Marriage, Family, and Human Sexuality** NATHAN A. FINN

God's design for sexuality is crucial for a healthy society. Nathan Finn recounts how the ERLC has upheld this truth in a changing culture.

24 **"The Glory of the Baptist Heritage"**

CORY D. HIGDON

Cory D. Higdon writes that where you find Baptists, you find devotion to religious liberty. He expounds on this principle and the ERLC's dedication to preserving our first freedom.

27 **Southern Baptists and the Sanctity of Life** JERRY SUTTON

How did the ERLC become pro-life? Jerry Sutton, former SBC pastor, traces the organization's path from pro-choice to unapologetic on sanctity of life issues.

32 **A Vital Presence in Washington** TOM STRODE

Southern Baptist representation in Washington, D.C., is crucial for the flourishing of our nation. Tom Strode covers the history of the Leland House, the hub of the ERLC's policy work.

36 **From Prohibition to Social Concerns** ALEX WARD

When did the ERLC begin? Alex Ward explains how the program of social concern under A.J. Barton helps answer the question.

40 SERIES: THE PATH FORWARD FOR THE ERLC

42 **A Bioethicist Looks Toward the Future of Human Dignity**

C. BEN MITCHELL

C. Ben Mitchell lays out three features essential for future work regarding human dignity.

44 **Contending for the Next Generation**

CHRISTIANA KIEFER

Christiana Kiefer demonstrates how society's view toward a biblical understanding of sexuality is changing, calling for a consistent, faithful witness from the ERLC.

46 **The Future of Religious Liberty Advocacy** CASEY MCCALL

Baptists have always championed soul freedom. Because of cultural change, Casey McCall describes future challenges to flourishing that the ERLC will need to address.

48 **Carrying on a Pro-Life Legacy** LAUREN MCAFEE

Lauren McAfee knows the challenges ahead for the pro-life movement. She outlines essential priorities for the future.

LIGHT

Light Magazine

Volume 9, Issue 1

Copyright © 2023 The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission

Editor-In-Chief Brent Leatherwood

Editor Lindsay Nicolet

Staff Editors Alex Ward
Jill Waggoner

Creative Director Lindsay Nicolet

Graphic Designer Jacob Blaze

The ministry of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission (SBC) is made possible by the sacrificial gifts of Southern Baptists to the Cooperative Program. We are grateful for the Cooperative Program and the prayerful support of Southern Baptists around the world.

SUBSCRIPTION INFORMATION

Light Magazine is a semiannual publication of The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission. Print subscriptions are available for \$10/year at erlc.com/light. Electronic versions, as well as previous issues, are available at ERLC.com.

CONNECT ONLINE

[f](https://www.facebook.com/erlcsbc) /erlcsbc

[@erlc](https://twitter.com/erlc)

[@erlcsbc](https://www.instagram.com/erlcsbc)

www.ERLC.com



THE ETHICS & RELIGIOUS
LIBERTY COMMISSION
OF THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONVENTION



**Help us place more
life-saving ultrasound
machines in abortion
destination states this year.**

Learn more at
[ERLC.com/Psalm139](https://erlc.com/Psalm139)



PSALM139
PROJECT

An Assignment Dependent on the Lord

One of the beautiful things about the Southern Baptist Convention is the spirit of cooperation across churches and entities. We each bring our giftings and assignments in order to come together and obey the Great Commission in the communities where the Lord has placed us. Within our SBC family, the role of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission is to be a servant to our churches and missionaries to the public square as we proclaim the good news of Jesus, advance his Kingdom, and seek the welfare of our cities.

The prevalent ideologies of our culture should point to the reality that the work and ministry of the ERLC is as important as ever. A society confused about the basics of biology and human sexuality is one that needs a clear vision for a better way. A culture so desensitized to evil that the taking of a baby's life in the womb is accepted, even celebrated, is one that is desperate for a voice of truth. A world awash in lies about the foundation of an individual's worth is one that is hungering for a renewed understanding of what it means to be human. And the growing segment of the population who are resistant to how religion shapes the lives of the faithful need to know that there is a Savior who is worth following.

The articles in this issue deal with the past, present, and future of the ERLC. They chronicle the history of this entity in key areas, the places where we were faithful to Scripture, and when previous generations failed to recognize the authority of Scripture on every issue. They chart the current faithful advocacy being done to uphold how God's Word applies to four crucial categories: human dignity, marriage and family, religious liberty, and life. And they look to the challenges that currently face Southern Baptists regarding those matters in the midst of a culture increasingly unmoored from Christian foundations. The contributions of everyone involved with this issue of *Light* magazine will help you understand anew why the ERLC exists and how dependent we are on the Lord to help us remain faithful to the task the SBC has entrusted to this Commission.

In reading these pages, I have grown in my knowledge of and respect for the assignment given to the ERLC. But, more importantly, I have been nudged to remember that it is our sovereign God who uses imperfect people and organizations to advance his Kingdom and bend the arc of history toward that perfect day—when we won't need to champion human dignity, marriage and family, religious liberty, or life because sin will be no more, Jesus will be King over all, his Church will be perfect, and his Word will reign supreme.

Lindsay Nicolet

LINDSAY NICOLET

MANAGING EDITOR, *LIGHT* MAGAZINE



THE ROLE OF THE
ETHICS AND RELIGIOUS
LIBERTY COMMISSION
IS TO BE A SERVANT
TO OUR CHURCHES
AND MISSIONARIES TO
THE PUBLIC SQUARE
AS WE PROCLAIM
THE GOOD NEWS OF
JESUS, ADVANCE HIS
KINGDOM, AND SEEK
THE WELFARE OF
OUR CITIES.



THE ETHICS & RELIGIOUS
LIBERTY COMMISSION
OF THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONVENTION

The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission
exists to assist churches by *resourcing*
Southern Baptists to think biblically about
cultural issues and by *representing* their
interests in public policy.

Join us in our work to honor religious liberty, protect life,
uphold human dignity, and strengthen marriages and family
in our nation and around the globe.

Learn more at [ERLC.com/join](https://www.ERLC.com/join)

A Biblical Vision for Race Relations

A REVIEW OF *INTEGRATION: RACE, T. B. MASTON, AND HOPE FOR THE DESEGREGATED CHURCH*

John Mark Yeats

In 1995, Southern Baptists finally issued a formal resolution apologizing “to all African Americans for condoning and/or perpetuating individual and systemic racism in our lifetime, and we genuinely repent of racism of which we have been guilty, whether consciously or unconsciously.”¹

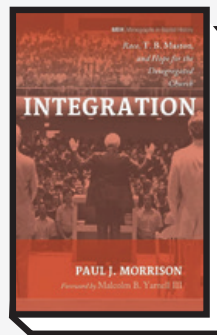
A CALL FOR INTEGRATION

But 1995 didn’t occur *ex nihilo*. In *Integration: Race, T. B. Maston, and Hope for the Desegregated Church*, Paul Morrison helps readers engage the decades-long work of T. B. Maston, who sought to “reform the racially misguided interpretations of Scripture in the church and their subsequent prejudices” (3). Maston, as the leading ethicist of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary until 1963, laid much of the groundwork that would eventually lead to sweeping changes in race relations in the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC).

While Maston’s standpoint on the necessity of the fully integrated body of Christ stood at odds with many member churches of the SBC, he stood fast on the principles of Scripture, advocating for a oneness found only in Christ.

To that end, Maston repudiated the “idea of the homogenous church” as falling

“short of the New Testament ideal. That ideal is a closely knit fellowship of people of different classes, colors, and cultures: all brothers and sisters in Christ” (71). In his work with the Christian Life Commission (CLC), Maston’s ethical framing led



WHILE MASTON’S STANDPOINT ON THE NECESSITY OF THE FULLY INTEGRATED BODY OF CHRIST STOOD AT ODDS WITH MANY MEMBER CHURCHES OF THE SBC, HE STOOD FAST ON THE PRINCIPLES OF SCRIPTURE, ADVOCATING FOR A ONENESS FOUND ONLY IN CHRIST.

to multiple resolutions as well as intergenerational relationships that crossed racial lines. “Maston was among those few professors in the 1930s seeking to offer a course of study for Black ministers” despite portions of campus remaining closed to the same students (69).

Maston, well aware of the evils of Jim Crow segregation, would go on to argue that Scripture requires Christians to remove any form of segregation as “contrary to the spirit and teaching of Christ” (24).

When tensions continued to build at Southwestern, Maston entered a forced

retirement in 1962 during the Civil Rights Movement. His work continued with the SBC through the CLC both in the Texas State Convention as well as at the national level. Unfortunately, the vision to move “from segregation through desegregation and finally into integration” took longer than his lifespan (71).

A UNIQUE FRAMING OF ETHICS

Morrison’s volume points to the unique framing of ethics that Maston employed to advocate for full integration of the people of God. As a conservative, Maston upheld the scriptures as the final authority in all matters and made his case for racial integration accordingly. Maston’s “elevation of the virtues of love

and justice as well as obedience to the commands and principles of Scripture” drove his work as an ethicist and leader fighting to end an unbiblical system (101).

While the convention still has quite a lot of work to do related to the issue of race, engaging authors like Maston helps move our conversations forward in all the best

ways. Developed from Morrison’s dissertation work, the text has a few rough patches that could have used a closer editorial eye, but readers should not miss the challenges that T. B. Maston, the great SBC statesman, brings to our own racially charged era. ★

John Mark Yeats serves as the president of Corban University in Salem, Oregon.

¹ “Resolution on Racial Reconciliation on the 150th Anniversary of the Southern Baptist Convention.” <https://www.sbc.net/resource-library/resolutions/resolution-on-racial-reconciliation-on-the-150th-anniversary-of-the-southern-baptist-convention/>



Photo from a 2017 Baptist Press article titled "1957 SBC president drew MLK's praise for stand."



“A Champion of the Christian Way in Race Relations”

BROOKS HAYS’ LEGACY IN THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONVENTION

Amy Whitfield

The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) has seen hundreds of leaders throughout its history. Typically, pastors of large churches or entity leaders are among the most commonly remembered, but the contribution of lay leaders is often just as instrumental. In a time of national and denominational turmoil, one Southern Baptist layman served at the highest levels of leadership in the United States government and the SBC, with equal commitment to both and a desire to make a difference.

Born at the close of the 19th century, Brooks Hays (1898–1981) saw tremendous change over his lifetime—in the world around him, in the culture of the South, and in Southern Baptist life. He would witness the establishment of the Executive Committee, the development and subsequent revision of the Baptist Faith and Message, the invention of the Cooperative Program, massive growth and institutionalization of denominational structures, the golden age of the layman’s movement, and the tortured Southern Baptist conscience of the civil rights era.

A THOROUGHLY BAPTIST BEGINNING

Hays’ childhood was entrenched in Southern Baptist culture. His parents

were devoted to their local church and were highly engaged in convention life. His father was an attorney but served as both clerk and moderator of his local Baptist association for years, setting the example for his son of what it meant to be a devoted layman. Brooks was attending associational meetings as a child with his father as soon as he was old enough to sit through them.¹

**HIS COMMITMENT TO PUBLIC SERVICE
NEVER ECLIPSED HIS COMMITMENT
TO THE CHURCH.**

At 10 years old, he went to the Arkansas Baptist State Convention’s annual meeting and was captivated. He attended his first SBC annual meeting in 1920 in Washington, D.C. Having graduated from college, he was working as a Treasury Department clerk and attending

law school at night. The convention had come to his city, and he was not going to miss it. He observed messengers and was “thrilled” by what he witnessed.

After law school, Hays returned to Arkansas and quickly established himself in state government, but his commitment to public service never eclipsed his commitment to the Church. He taught

was a congressman. In 1953, he introduced House Concurrent Resolution 60 to establish a prayer room for members of Congress. Now 70 years later, the Congressional Prayer Room still sits near the Rotunda and has been the space for countless senators and representatives to quiet their hearts and minds as they approach their work.

His service on the Christian Life Commission began with his appointment to the Committee on Progress on Race Relations in 1953. He was chairman of the CLC for two years beginning in 1955, and in 1957 he was elected president of the SBC, being the sixth out of seven total laymen to hold the office.³ These were tumultuous years for the Commission, specifically in its relationship to the convention as a whole, and most difficulties came down to one major issue.

THE CHRISTIAN LIFE COMMISSION AWARDED HAYS ITS FIRST-EVER DISTINGUISHED SERVICE AWARD, “IN RECOGNITION OF UNIQUE AND OUTSTANDING CONTRIBUTIONS TO SOUTHERN BAPTISTS, THE NATION, AND MANKIND IN THE INTEREST OF WORLD PEACE, RACIAL JUSTICE, AND CHRISTIAN CITIZENSHIP.”

A TENURE DURING TUMULT

Both Hays’ congressional career and convention leadership were marked by the primary matter that captured the South throughout the 1950s. Segregation was as much a battle in the churches as in the culture, and as the unity of Southern Baptist cooperation was tested, Hays’ search for a middle ground came at a personal cost. The Supreme Court’s decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* caused turmoil throughout the South and within the SBC. As Southerners resisted the enforcement of desegregation, churches saw division and disunity among their members.

a popular Bible class at Second Baptist Church in Little Rock that was incredibly diverse for its time, became a deacon and Sunday school leader in his early 20s, and was president of the Arkansas Sunday School Convention before he turned 30.

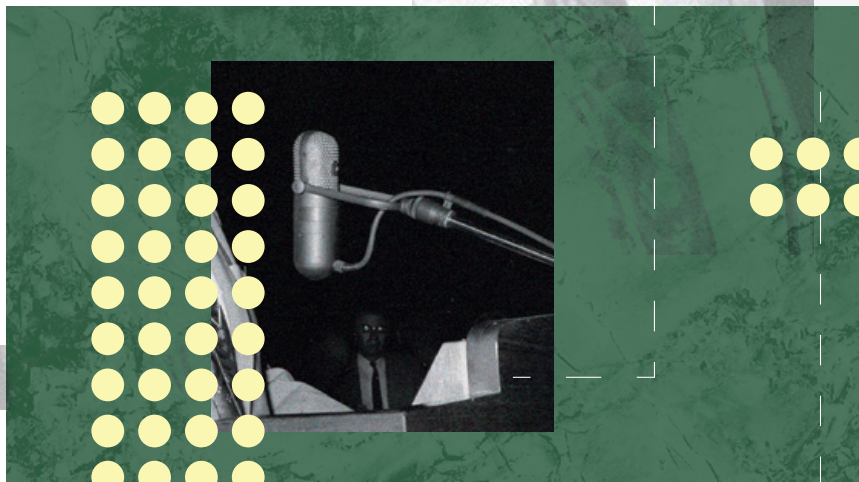
A LEADER IN CONGRESS AND THE CONVENTION

By the time Hays was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1942, there was no question that he would be just as much of a churchman as he

In 1950, he was elected second vice president of the convention, serving alongside President R.G. Lee of Bellevue Baptist Church in Memphis, Tennessee. At the time of his election, he was not in attendance, but he sent a telegram to the convention from his House of Representatives office: “Please convey my profound thanks for the high honor conferred upon me by my fellow Baptists. It will be a great pleasure to work with them in carrying forward the great program of our denomination.”²

Hays wanted Southern Baptists to focus on doing good and improving race relations, but the path that he tried to forge was initially inconsistent as he navigated his two worlds. The CLC encouraged acceptance of the *Brown* decision in its 1954 report, yet Hays was one of 82 members of the House to sign the Southern Manifesto attacking the decision. He later expressed regret for adding his name, but the contradiction was stark. A few years later his public stance was more clear and had lasting personal consequences.

In 1957, shortly after his election as SBC president, Hays inserted himself



into brewing trouble at home by appealing to Arkansas Gov. Orval Faubus to stop his defiance of the federal government over desegregation. He arranged a meeting in Rhode Island between Faubus and President Dwight D. Eisenhower, but his attempt to bring them together and forestall the crisis failed. Faubus enlisted the National Guard to stop the Little Rock Nine from entering Central High School, and the stand-off ended with Eisenhower's executive order to federalize the National Guard and desegregate the school by force.

His opposition to Faubus' refusal to comply with *Brown* had career-ending implications for Hays. His attempt to broker peace cost him his seat in Congress when he lost to a last-minute write-in segregationist candidate.⁴ It was not enough to cost him favor with the majority of Southern Baptists, who reelected him in 1958 for a second term in spite of two surprise nominations of candidates to challenge him.⁵

The messengers were still wary of the CLC's support of desegregation, but Hays encouraged trust in the organization. In his 1958 address to the convention, he commended to messengers the importance of

the Commission to the churches. After acknowledging its mandate of speaking for Southern Baptists where authorized, he added, "Equally important is its role of familiarizing our people with problems of this nature, supplying counsel and advice on the subject as well as information on the Scripture teaching in specific areas, and to seek a sensitizing of the Christian conscience wherever evil, injustice and oppression exist anywhere in the world."⁶

The issue of foreign relations was also important to Hays, particularly the Church's role in the world. As SBC president, he traveled to Russia and connected with local Baptist churches as well as other Christians. Some of his congressional colleagues were troubled by the trip, but he assured them that it was a non-political visit. Some Southern Baptists were not pleased that he was interacting with people who had other religious beliefs, but Hays stood up for religious liberty and the need to live at peace with others.

Hays also recommended an SBC presidential committee on world peace, which served for a time and then gave its work over to the CLC.⁷ In 1959, the CLC appointed him to be the first Southern

Baptist observer to the United Nations, where he witnessed "a deep appreciation of Baptist influence and our point of view in world affairs."⁸

Hays finished his career speaking, writing, and teaching in law schools and universities. He continued to build up the Church and encourage Southern Baptists as the devoted layman he had always been. On March 1, 1965, the Christian Life Commission awarded Hays its first-ever distinguished service award, "in recognition of unique and outstanding contributions to Southern Baptists, the nation, and mankind in the interest of world peace, racial justice, and Christian citizenship."⁹

Brooks Hays never felt the call to vocational ministry, but he took seriously the responsibility to serve the Church. At the heart of his efforts was a desire for cooperation—that people would stand together and do what is right. When he died in 1981, he was remembered as "one of the great lay presidents of the Southern Baptist Convention" and "a champion of the Christian way in race relations."¹⁰ ★

Amy Whitfield is executive director of communications at The Summit Church.

1 "Brooks Hays' Father Dies In Arkansas." (1959, June 10). *Baptist Press*, 2.

2 "Brooks Hays Announces As Governor Candidate." (1966, April 14). *Baptist Press*, 1.

3 "Hays Is Sixth Layman Chosen SEC President." (1957, June 13). *Baptist Press*, 1.

4 *Encyclopedia of Arkansas*. (2022, November 16).

Encyclopedia of Arkansas. <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/lawrence-brooks-hays-506/> 5 1958 SBC Annual, 50-51.

6 1958 SBC Annual, 79.

7 *Ibid.*, 80.

8 "Hays Reports His United Nations Visit." (1959, October 10). *Baptist Press*, 1.

9 "Hays Receives Award For Role in Ethics." (1965, March 3). *Baptist Press*, 2-3.

10 "Former SBC President Brooks Hays, 83, Dies." (1981, October 12). *Baptist Press*, 4-5.



For the Love of Christ and Love of Others

EUNIE SMITH'S LIFE OF PUBLIC SERVICE FUELED BY HER FAITH

Meredith Flynn

Eunie Smith has dedicated decades of her life to promoting biblical convictions in the public square.

As president of Eagle Forum of Alabama, she lobbies leaders on behalf of families, advocating for conservative principles. She also served eight years as a trustee of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC), including one term as the board's first-ever female chair.

The country has seen sweeping changes during Smith's years of public service, but her commitment to God's Word remains.

"I don't see that God's commandments have any cutoff," Smith said. "His commands are for all times, and we are placed

here in this time to strive to live according to his principles. And to see that they're upheld for future generations."

A CALLING, THEN AND NOW

Smith's early work focused on promoting democratic American ideals after she and her husband, Albert Lee, were alerted to the threat communism posed to those ideals through a study group. He would later serve in the U.S. House of Representatives for Alabama's 6th district, but in their early years, he worked as an insurance salesman, and she was involved in education reform through the Freedom Education Foundation.

"We had speakers and materials that we took into the classrooms on the threat of communism and the merits of the American system, freedom, and opportunity for all," she said. The experience educated her. "I had received an education, but I hadn't been motivated to look into the constitutional principles. Like most Americans, I had taken it for granted."

Lee was elected to Congress in 1980, which Smith described as a hopeful time to go to Washington. The Jesus Revolution of the 1970s had shown the nation a move of the Holy Spirit, awakening many to personal faith in Christ for

the first time. In the speeches her husband gave during his campaign, he ended with 2 Chronicles 7:14, encouraging Christians to be salt and light, to engage in political processes, and to share their faith—all in hopes that others would turn to Christ. The verse was on his wall in Washington, she said.

The couple realized Lee would maximize his time at home and in Washington if their family stayed in Alabama, so Smith and their three children joined him in Washington in the summer. It was a challenge with young children, she said, one that required asking God to keep her priorities straight.

By that time, she was a leader of Eagle Forum of Alabama, which formed as a state member of the national effort to defeat the Equal Rights Amendment. She still serves as president and is currently leading a push to influence school curriculum. She served as Eagle Forum's

you have an obligation to keep trying, until the Lord closes the door.

"And, of course, the results are always in His hand."

SPEAK OUT AND SPEAK UP

When Smith was asked to serve on the ERLC's board of trustees, she knew Lee would have been pleased. Her husband, who passed away in 1997, had served on the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs and also chaired the Southern Baptist Convention's Public Affairs Committee, which preceded the ERLC.

It was a blessing to serve on the ERLC board while Richard Land was the ERLC president, Smith said. During her eight years of service from 2005 to 2013, the country experienced massive shifts which are mirrored in ERLC reports from that time. Abortion, stem cell research, cloning, gambling, immigration reform, racial reconciliation, human trafficking,

mandate that required employers to cover abortion-causing drugs in their insurance plans.

Through various print and online resources, the ERLC equipped Christians to use their own voices to address these issues. "The need is ever-growing for men and women who trust Christ to proclaim His Truth in the public square, in the marketplace, and in their homes," reads the ERLC's report to the Southern Baptist Convention from 2011, the year Smith served as board chair.

Proclaiming truth in the public square is still a need today, she said. During the Jesus Revolution years, she noted, theologian Francis Schaeffer's books and videos brought a lot of people out of the pews and into public policy. "I think we desperately need that again," she said.

"I'd like to think that more evangelical Christians would recognize the need to speak out and speak up and stand for God's principles everywhere," Smith said. She urged older generations to teach those who are younger the value of our constitutional principles—which she believes align with biblical principles—so that they understand the merits of our country.

There is much we've lost sight of in the U.S., she said—the Golden Rule, loving one another, and disagreeing agreeably while standing up for what you believe is right. "That's a real challenge, especially today. We're so polarized as a country that we seldom hear instructive debates." They don't just degenerate into name calling, she said; many debates start that way.

That tone isn't good for our body politic, she said, or for our witness as Christians. "We want to be loving so that we can be used of Him," Smith said.

"You have to remember why am I doing this. It's not out of hate. It's out of love, love of Christ and love of others." ★

Meredith Flynn is a freelance writer.

"IT WAS A CALLING, AND I THINK IT STILL IS. ONCE YOU HAVE BEEN INVOLVED AND YOU SEE HOW, WHEN, AND WHERE YOU CAN TRY TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE, THEN I THINK YOU HAVE AN OBLIGATION TO KEEP TRYING, UNTIL THE LORD CLOSSES THE DOOR."

—EUNIE SMITH

national president for two years and still sits on its board.

"It was a calling, and I think it still is," Smith said, when asked what has kept her going. "Once you have been involved and you see how, when, and where you can try to make a difference, then I think

creation care, healthcare reform, and the definition of marriage were some of the major issues addressed by the ERLC.

The agency also continued to shine a light on human rights violations and religious persecution around the world. At home, the ERLC opposed a healthcare

THE ERIC'S WORK THROUGH THE YEARS



SINCE THE EARLY 1900s, the committee that would become the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission has been serving Southern Baptists and engaging the public square for the good of all people and the glory of God. Beginning with temperance and the societal problems caused by the abuse of alcohol, the issues championed by past leaders have culminated today in four categories: human dignity, marriage and family, religious liberty, and life. The following articles explore the ERLC's progression over a century in these important areas.

STANDING IN THE GAP FOR HUMAN DIGNITY

Proclaiming the Inherent Worth of Every Individual

Chelsea Sobolik



WHAT LINKS THE TOPICS of immigration, gambling, racial unity, and prison reform? Underneath these issues is the awareness that each individual is created in the image of God and therefore possesses inherent worth and dignity. The Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC) seeks to advance human flourishing and a just society through furthering policies that recognize the dignity inherent to all people. This is an outflow of the Bible's teaching, as well as various statements from the the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) recognizing our calling to stand up for the marginalized and oppressed. In so doing, Christians point to a God who is just and commands us to seek justice and righteousness, especially for the vulnerable (Micah 6:8).

PREDATORY RELATIONSHIPS

The ERLC stands in Southern Baptists' long tradition of opposing predatory relationships and the unjust treatment of the impoverished. Though initial leaders of the organization such as A. J. Barton often focused on gambling as a vice, they also noted its destructive connection between the preyed upon individual and those seeking to profit from them.

They connected the problem of liquor in the saloon to the various vices that sprang up in the community around it, such as gambling and prostitution, which were deleterious for the poor and the family. This theme of speaking up for the vulnerable in society was championed by past leaders of the organization such as Hugh Brimm, Acker (A.C.) Miller, and Foy Valentine.

More recently, the ERLC has spoken to the problems of predatory relationships and how society treats the poor. On the basis of a 2014 resolution condemning predatory payday lending, the ERLC advocated and was crucial in the repeal of the 2017 “True Lender” rule, which allowed predatory lending organizations to avoid regulations in their state and enabled them to charge unjust and exorbitant interest rates on the borrowers.¹ Additionally, the ERLC has spoken out about the rise of online gambling and sports betting, noting that the rapid legalization of online sports betting is most likely to injure the poor and those who are impoverished.²

RACE

The history of the SBC and the ERLC (and the earlier commissions) is one that is tragic in its failure to uphold human dignity, particularly for non-white individuals. The SBC was founded out of a commitment to send slave owners as missionaries, wedding the gospel to the anti-Christian message of human enslavement. Even the earliest leader of the Committee on Temperance (the forerunner of the ERLC), A. J. Barton, though supportive of some measures of African American institutions such as the founding of American Baptist College and Seminary, was still committed to a program of racial segregation.

However, following Barton, the Christian Life Commission (CLC) took a turn toward racial equality under the leadership of all the following presidents. Imperfectly at times, they advocated for recognizing the dignity and worth of African Americans, addressing the primary problem of their day.

In one notable instance, A.C. Miller, in his first address as president of the CLC to the convention, offered a resolution in support of the recent *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling ending school segregation in 1954. Met with fierce opposition, he called on Southern Baptists to respect the ruling. Jesse Weatherspoon, a former leader of the organization, stood up to defend the resolution, concluding that “If we withdraw this from our

The Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission seeks to advance human flourishing and a just society through furthering policies that recognize the dignity inherent to all people.

consideration tonight, we are saying to the United States of America, ‘Count Baptists out in the matter of equal justice, and I do not believe we want to do that!’” Following his speech, the recommendation was passed.³

Additionally, at other points in the history of the SBC, the ERLC played a key role in advancing the cause of racial reconciliation. Former ERLC President Richard Land was pivotal in the passage of the 1995 resolution apologizing

to “all African-Americans for condoning and/or perpetuating individual and systemic racism in our lifetime and we genuinely repent of racism of which we have been guilty, whether consciously (Psalm 19:13) or unconsciously (Leviticus 4:27).”⁴

In 2016, Russell Moore spoke to and supported the resolution repudiating the Confederate battle flag, noting that “the Cross and the Confederate flag cannot co-exist without one setting the other on fire.”⁵ The following year, Moore spoke up in defense of the 2017 resolution which condemned “The Anti-Gospel of Alt-Right White Supremacy.” In his speech from the floor in support of the resolution, Moore referred to racism and white supremacy as attacks on the gospel and Christ himself.⁶

In 2018, the ERLC and The Gospel Coalition co-hosted a special event in Memphis, Tennessee, called MLK50: Gospel Reflections from the Mountaintop, with nearly 4,000 attendees. A diverse array of speakers emphasized that racial unity is a gospel issue, with the dividing wall of hostility torn down by Christ (Eph. 2:14), and equipped the body of Christ to pursue racial unity in the midst of tremendous tension. One of the highlights from the MLK50 conference was that over \$1.5 million dollars were raised for the “MLK50 Dream Forward Scholarship Initiative,” which allows Christian colleges and seminaries to invest in the educational future of minority students.⁷

CRIMINAL JUSTICE REFORM

As early as the 1960s, at a ceremony held in the Rose Garden of the White House and organized by the CLC and Foy Valentine, the attorney general called for greater church involvement in crime prevention and support of law enforcement, but he also addressed “criminal rehabilitation.”⁸ However, as historian Aaron Griffith has argued,

this was often a position in contrast to the majority of the laity in the SBC, many of whom favored a law and order political strategy.⁹

One of the more recent and prominent ways the ERLC has been able to encourage lasting change in this area is by advocating for criminal justice reform. Through partnerships with organizations such as Prison Fellowship, the ERLC has advocated for reforms which respect the humanity and *imago Dei* of individuals while incarcerated, and continues to seek policies that make the justice system more equitable.

One prominent reform occurred in 2018 with the First Step Act, passed and signed into law by President Donald Trump. This bill “provide[s] for programs to help reduce the risk that prisoners will recidivate upon release from prison.”¹⁰ The ERLC advocated for the act repeatedly in

care and respect (Deut. 10:19). Richard Land was known for saying that America has spoken in two ways to immigrants, with signs saying “Help Wanted” and “No Trespassing.” Land argued that the nation should both secure its borders and provide a pathway to legal citizenship for the undocumented individuals already in the country, pointing back to a promise made by President George Bush in his 2000 campaign.¹³

In 2016, the SBC passed a resolution on “Refugee Ministry,”¹⁴ and in 2018, passed another titled “On Immigration,”¹⁵ stating their desire to see “immigration reform include an emphasis on securing our borders and providing a pathway to legal status with appropriate restitutionary measures, maintaining the priority of family unity, resulting in an efficient immigration system that honors the value and dignity of those

enriched, including many Southern Baptist churches.¹⁶

CONCLUSION

Christians are called to care about the least of these and to work for just systems to protect our vulnerable neighbors. May we pray that the Lord would open our eyes to those we can help and use our time, talent, and treasure to proclaim that every person has inherent worth. On behalf of Southern Baptists and before the world, the ERLC will continue to uphold the dignity of every individual through advocacy efforts, equip pastors and local churches, and help form the moral imagination of others to see that everyone is precious in God’s sight. ★

Chelsea Sobolik is senior director of policy & advocacy at Lifeline Children’s Services.

May we pray that the Lord would open our eyes to those we can help and use our time, talent, and treasure to proclaim that every person has inherent worth.

meetings with congressional staff and sent letters to legislators urging its passage because of the value of each person. As the ERLC noted: “These [people] are our neighbors who bear God’s image ... A balance needs to be struck between upholding the law for community safety and dealing holistically with how we punish and rehabilitate individuals who break those laws.”¹²

IMMIGRATION

The ERLC also works to equip Christians to carry out the call of Scripture to treat the immigrant and refugee with

seeking a better life for themselves and their families.”

To that end, the ERLC works with the Evangelical Immigration Table—a national movement committed to applying biblical principles to immigration issues—to urge Congress to take action and develop bipartisan solutions. Additionally, the ERLC has advocated for a robust refugee resettlement program by making the case that the program, since its inception in 1980, has long enjoyed both broad bipartisan support in Congress and in the communities these men and women have

- 1 <https://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/erlc-applauds-the-u-s-house-of-representatives-for-repealing-the-true-lender-rule/>
- 2 <https://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/how-christians-can-think-about-the-epidemic-of-online-gambling-and-sports-betting/>
- 3 https://cdn.sbhl.org/wp-content/uploads/20211228154827/SBC_1954-16-Friday_evening-Part_1.MP3; https://cdn.sbhl.org/wp-content/uploads/20211228154836/SBC_1954-17-Friday_evening-Part_2.MP3.
- 4 <https://www.sbc.net/resource-library/resolutions/resolution-on-racial-reconciliation-on-the-150th-anniversary-of-the-southern-baptist-convention/>
- 5 <https://www.russellmoore.com/2016/06/14/southern-baptists-confederate-flag/>
- 6 <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/sbc-denounces-alt-right-white-supremacy/>
- 7 <https://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/6-special-features-of-mlk50/>
- 8 Aaron Griffith, *God’s Law and Order: The Politics of Punishment in Evangelical America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), 125.
- 9 Ibid, 127.
- 10 <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/5682/text>
- 11 <https://erlc.com/resource-library/policy-briefs/erlc-supports-criminal-justice-reform/>
- 12 <https://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/how-the-erlc-has-been-advocating-for-marginalized-communities/>
- 13 <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=127769214>
- 14 <https://www.sbc.net/resource-library/resolutions/on-refugee-ministry/14>
- 15 <https://www.sbc.net/resource-library/resolutions/on-immigration/>
- 16 <https://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/why-we-need-to-rebuild-the-refugee-resettlement-program/>



MARRIAGE, FAMILY, AND HUMAN SEXUALITY

Upholding Truth in an Increasingly Decadent Culture

Nathan A. Finn

SOUTHERN BAPTISTS IN 2023 find ourselves mostly out of step with the values of the wider American culture. This is especially true when it comes to sexual ethics and how best to understand marriage and the family. It's not that Baptists have changed our views. Rather, in recent decades, our nation has drifted increasingly into a post-Christian moral consensus.

For over a century, the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC) and its forerunners have played a key role in helping Southern Baptists navigate threats to a biblical vision of marriage, the family, and human sexuality. As American culture has moved further into decadence, the ERLC has refined its vision, educated Baptists about biblical ethics, and advocated faithfully for our views in the public square.

ALCOHOL AND FAMILY STABILITY

In the early 20th century, Southern Baptist views on marriage and family were mostly aligned with majority opinions in American culture. Nevertheless, there were threats to flourishing families. One of the most pronounced was alcohol abuse, which Baptists believed contributed to the destruction of individuals and the dissolution of the family. Many American evangelicals had begun advocating for total abstinence from beverage alcohol following the American Civil War, when countless thousands of veterans who suffered from alcoholism struggled with reintegrating into civilian life.

In 1908, Southern Baptists established a Committee on Temperance, which

became the first forerunner of the ERLC. In 1913, a newly formed Social Service Commission (SSC) absorbed the older committee, led by A.J. Barton. Southern Baptists and other evangelicals celebrated the ratification of the 18th Amendment in 1919, which prohibited the “manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors.” Under Barton’s leadership, the SSC encouraged Southern Baptists to adopt several anti-alcohol resolutions and advocated for the Baptist consensus in the political sphere.

Prior to mid-century, the Commission also led Southern Baptists to pass resolutions against other social ills they believed threatened the family, corrupted children, and undermined public morality including gambling and immoral content in motion pictures.

THE CHRISTIAN LIFE COMMISSION AND THE SEXUAL REVOLUTION

In 1953, the SSC was renamed the Christian Life Commission (CLC), a change that reflected a more holistic emphasis on applied ethics for Christian faithfulness and paved the way for published resources and conferences. In the period between 1950 and 1980, the CLC mostly emphasized race relations and matters of war and peace. The key figure during these years was Foy Valentine, an ethicist who served as president from 1960 to 1987.

Valentine's presidency overlapped with the advent of the sexual revolution that led to the dissolution of the traditional biblical consensus about marriage, the family, and sexuality in America. No-fault divorce, second-wave feminism, sexual promiscuity, homosexuality, and cohabitation were each becoming increasingly acceptable, especially among the baby boomers and their children.

The CLC struggled at times to offer a clear biblical witness in response to some of these trends. Conferences and literature addressed issues that threatened the family including alcohol and drug abuse, poverty, divorce,

cohabitation, and sexual promiscuity. However, CLC leaders sometimes framed abortion as a birth control issue, remained mostly ambivalent about homosexuality, and occasionally invited speakers who promoted progressive sexual ethics to conferences.

By the mid-1970s, American evangelical concerns about sexual ethics were inspiring increased political advocacy among moral traditionalists. Many Southern Baptists shared the cares of this politically active Religious Right and desired a more full-throated affirmation of traditional biblical values.

THE CONSERVATIVE RESURGENCE AND SOCIAL CONSERVATISM

Though the Conservative Resurgence which began in 1979 was primarily about promoting the truthfulness of Scripture, the vast majority of the conservative participants also believed that the Bible spoke clearly to God's design for sexuality. Throughout the 1980s, Southern Baptists passed numerous resolutions that affirmed traditional views of sexual ethics including marriage between one man and one woman, sex within the covenant of marriage, the evils of pornography, the aberrant nature of homosexuality, and

gender complementarity in the family and the Church.

However, the CLC was sometimes on the opposite side of these resolutions. Under the leadership of presidents Valentine and Larry Baker, the CLC remained ambivalent about both abortion and homosexuality. The CLC was also closely aligned with the gender egalitarianism advocated by moderate Southern Baptists and embodied in the failed Equal Rights Amendment.

By 1988, conservatives had gained control of the CLC's board and elected Richard Land as president of the commission. Under Land's leadership (1988-2013), the CLC's positions were more closely aligned with the conservative consensus of grassroots Southern Baptists. Southern Baptists defunded the Baptist Joint Committee in 1990. In 1997, the CLC was transformed into the ERLC, which was responsible for addressing both social ethics and religious liberty concerns on behalf of Southern Baptists.

ERLC AND THE CULTURE WARS

In the early 1990s, the sociologist James Davison Hunter and politician Pat Buchanan argued memorably that conservative Christians and progressive secularists, as well as their allies, were engaged in a "culture war" that often centered around marriage, the family, and human sexuality.

Under Land's leadership, the ERLC became a leading voice among social conservatives committed to a biblical vision for sexual ethics. For example, Land advocated for the Defense of Marriage Act (1996), which passed Congress and was signed by President Clinton. The ERLC also purchased a second office in Washington, D.C., to better facilitate advocacy for biblical convictions at the national level.

During the 1990s and into the 2000s, Southern Baptists continued to pass resolutions affirming orthodox Christian



views, though this time with the support and encouragement of the ERLC. Commission publications and conferences also championed the conservative views of Southern Baptists. In addition, Land served on the committees that amended the Baptist Faith and Message in 1998 to include a statement that affirmed a traditional view of the family and revised the confession in 2000 so that it clearly rejected homosexuality, pornography, and gender egalitarianism.

A key feature of both the presidencies of George W. Bush (2001–2009) and Barack Obama (2009–2017) was the culture war that increasingly coalesced around the issue of gay marriage and celebration of LGBTQ+ lifestyles. Land served as a key counselor to Bush and spoke forthrightly against the ordination of homosexuals and the sex abuse scandal in the Roman Catholic Church. He also authored a book titled *For Faith and Family: Changing America by Strengthening the Family* (2002), promoted social conservatism on his daily radio show, and encouraged “values voters” to mobilize to vote for socially conservative candidates and ballot measures in 2004. Further, the ERLC supported state marriage amendments that defined marriage as between one man and one woman.

In 2013, Land retired from the presidency of the ERLC, and Russell Moore (2013–2021) began his tenure as president. Moore’s administration overlapped with a series of notable defeats for cultural conservatism in the public square. In 2015, the U.S. Supreme Court decision *Obergefell v. Hodges* required states to recognize same-sex marriage. Soon, progressive activists and corporations began to push for increasing normalization of LGBTQ+ lifestyles and to exert political or economic pressure on individuals, companies, and even states that refused to embrace revisionist views of marriage, the family, and human sexuality.

Under Moore’s leadership, the ERLC remained committed to equipping

Southern Baptists and advocating on behalf of a biblical vision of these increasingly contested issues. The ERLC website was expanded and content was published to help Southern Baptists and other believers to think biblically about

As American culture has moved further into decadence, the ERLC has refined its vision, educated Baptists about biblical ethics, and advocated faithfully for our views in the public square.

sexual ethics. Advocacy at the state and national level continued. Moore and ERLC ethicist Andrew Walker edited a series of books titled *Gospel for Life* that addressed a whole range of ethical issues including marriage, same-sex marriage, adoption, parenting, and pornography. Moore also published several other books addressing adoption, marriage, and same-sex marriage, while Walker published a book offering a Christian response to transgenderism.

SEXUAL ABUSE IN THE SBC

At the same time the ERLC was equipping believers to engage with the growing sexual decadence of American culture, the commission was also addressing sexual sins and crimes in the Southern Baptist camp. In 2019, the *Houston Chronicle* published a five-part series that alleged a pattern of abuse and cover-ups dating back

over two decades. During the final two years of Moore’s presidency, the ERLC focused increased attention addressing the scandal of sexual abuse among Southern Baptist churches.

In 2019, the ERLC hosted a panel discussion on sex abuse at the SBC Annual Meeting, dedicated its national conference that year to the same topic, and launched an initiative called Caring Well to equip congregations to prevent abuse and respond faithfully when abuse occurs. The ERLC continued to partner with appointed sex abuse study committees, task forces, and third-party groups that were tasked with claims of abuse and cover-ups, as well as make recommendations on how best to move forward.

CONCLUSION

Though American culture continues to drift morally and the issues remain contentious, Southern Baptists steadfastly affirm a biblical understanding of marriage, the family, and human sexuality. Our convictions are rooted in Scripture, reflect God’s divine design, and result in authentic human flourishing. Though our nation has reached a post-Christian moral consensus on these matters for the time being, the ERLC continues to serve Southern Baptists faithfully by helping us form our convictions and advocate on our behalf in the public square. By God’s grace, we will maintain a consistent public witness—to the glory of God and in the hope of the renewal of our nation. ★

Nathan A. Finn is provost and dean of the university faculty at North Greenville University in South Carolina.



“THE GLORY OF THE BAPTIST HERITAGE”

Religious Liberty and the Work of the ERLC

Cory D. Higdon

WHERE YOU FIND BAPTISTS, you find a people devoted to the cause of religious liberty. From the earliest decades of the 17th century, Baptists like Thomas Helwys and John Murton contended for soul freedom, or the ability to choose what one believes, for all people—a campaign they conducted within the walls of Newgate prison as incarcerated dissenters from the

established Anglican order. Their efforts were picked up by subsequent figures such as Roger Williams, John Clarke, and Obadiah Holmes. These three individuals, who also suffered for their religious beliefs, helped plant religious liberty as a viable political policy in colonial New England.

Men such as Isaac Backus and John Leland were tireless advocates in the

colonial period and early republic for the Baptist principle of religious liberty. They argued that religious establishment inhibited the conditions conducive to true spiritual regeneration and political prosperity. Given the Baptist tradition on religious liberty, it was no wonder that U.S. Secretary of State Charles Hughes declared in 1922: “This contribution is



the glory of the Baptist heritage, more distinctive than any other characteristic of belief or practice.” George Truett, the former pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas, also argued that “it is the consistent and insistent contention of our Baptist people, always and everywhere, that religion must be forever voluntary and uncoerced.”

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY ADVOCACY THROUGH THE ERLC

Southern Baptists have perpetuated these ideals, contending for the cause of conscience throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. They have also adopted similar strategies from Baptists in previous generations by cooperating together, forming committees and entities specifically charged with defending religious liberty in America and abroad.

The formation of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC) in 1997 from the Christian Life Commission (CLC) and Public Affairs Committee (PAC), represented a renewed emphasis among Southern Baptists to fund a research and policy arm of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) tasked with protecting and defending the sacred rights of conscience. This vital work channeled what Baptists from the early American republic understood about religious liberty: success in the cause of freedom was more certain through cooperation.

Since the ERLC’s formation in 1997, the cultural climate has grown more hostile to Christianity. The sexual revolution and the increased polarization of the American public square have led academics and political activists alike to question the importance of religious liberty. In the wake of the legalization of same-sex marriage with the *Obergefell v. Hodges* U.S. Supreme Court decision in 2015, religious liberty is culturally contested in ways it has not been before, with some viewing it merely as a pretext to justify bigotry and discrimination.

As such, Baptists no longer find themselves contending for the liberty not to pay taxes in support of the established religious order. On the contrary, all Christians now confront a society averse to the moral and ethical claims of Christianity. This predicament presents a myriad of peculiar and perilous challenges to religious liberty as Christians now contend for the liberty and freedom to live publicly in a way that corresponds with their deepest convictions.

Unlike our forebears who contended for the right to withhold their children from infant baptism, today’s controversies are often tied to questions of sexuality and gender. Must a Christian baker design a cake celebrating a “transgender birthday”? Must Christian foster care and adoption agencies alter their deeply held beliefs on marriage and family in order to partner

with the state in the care of orphans? Must Christian colleges and universities surrender their theological convictions if they plan to participate in state funding and enjoy tax incentives? These questions, and many more, reverberate throughout the public square with significant ramifications on religious liberty.

Rooted in a long-standing, robust theological heritage, and with conviction about the common goods secured through conscience protections, the ERLC has confronted these challenges facing the Church. The efforts of the ERLC on the matter of religious liberty have emerged from a clear conception about the origin of soul freedom: religious liberty is a natural right, making it pre-political and therefore not subject to the whims of the mob or the headwinds of the cultural climate.

This principled understanding of religious liberty has undergirded the ERLC’s advocacy over the years. From landmark judicial decisions to religious liberty on a global scale, the ERLC has sought to represent Southern Baptists on issues of conscience, protecting this first freedom for the purposes of the gospel and human flourishing.

Amicus briefs

Advocacy before the court is an important part of the ERLC’s efforts. One way the Commission does this is through amicus, or friend of the court, briefs. Before the formation of the ERLC, the CLC started to file amici briefs on religious liberty in the 1990s, once it absorbed the PAC. Since then, the ERLC has filed numerous amici briefs in watershed religious liberty cases as a means of advocacy before the courts. These include:

- *Hosanna-Tabor Evangelical Lutheran Church and School v. EEOC*: a 2012 case where the court held that the First Amendment prevents the federal government from intervening in the employment practices of churches,

- *Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission*: a 2018 case that involved a Christian baker who desired to operate his business in a way consistent with his Christian faith,
- *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby*: a 2014 case requiring employers to offer abortion-causing drugs in their insurance coverage as part of the Affordable Care Act,
- and *Our Lady of Guadalupe School v. Morrissey Berru*: a 2020 case that debated whether the First Amendment's religion clause allows courts to interfere with a religious organization's employment decisions when the employee performs religious duties.

In each of these cases, the ERLC, on behalf of Southern Baptists, advanced the cause of religious liberty in the public square, contending that the rights of conscience cannot be sequestered to the private spheres of our homes or churches. Instead, men and women, as those made in the image of God, have the right to publicly profess and practice their religious beliefs without fear, government interference, or retribution.

Legislation

In addition to its legal portfolio, the ERLC has raised awareness amongst Southern Baptists on key pieces of legislation. Most notably, the CLC, under the direction of Richard Land, joined the Coalition for the Free Exercise of Religion in order to secure the passage of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA, 1993), which protects religious liberty for all Americans.¹ Further, the Commission has opposed the Do No Harm Act since its initial introduction in 2017² because it would weaken religious liberty protections for millions of Americans by hollowing out RFRA.³

Most recently, the ERLC has advocated tirelessly against the Equality Act,

which seeks to expand the definition of "sex" to include "sexual orientation" and "gender identity" (SOGI) and constitutes one of the gravest threats to American religious liberty. In addition, the Commission continues to call for

*Where you find Baptists, you
find a people devoted to the
cause of religious liberty.*

vital conscience protections in appropriations bills which provide money for government funding each year.

By cooperating together and funding the ERLC, Southern Baptists have dedicated important resources to ensure scrutiny of proposed laws that would infringe upon the rights of conscience. In fact, throughout its existence, former presidents of the ERLC have appeared before Congress, contending for policy initiatives that protect our most fundamental liberties.⁴

International issues

The challenges threatening religious liberty in America, though important, have not eclipsed the plight of those around the world who suffer religious persecution. On this front as well, the ERLC has devoted time and resources to raise awareness about the importance of religious liberty around the world. As a natural right, religious liberty must be recognized, respected, and protected in every nation. Furthermore, securing religious liberty abroad nourishes relations between America and other nations, engendering peace and concord among countries.

In 2021, the SBC passed a resolution called "On the Uyghur Genocide," becoming the first denomination to rightly call out the atrocity happening

in China.⁵ In addition, the ERLC, along with like-minded partners, advocated for and celebrated the passing of the "Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act."⁶

Further, the ERLC has wielded its influence in the public square to try and alleviate religiously-motivated violence across the globe, such as the persecution of Christians in Malaysia⁷ and North Korea.⁸ In so doing, not only has the ERLC helped promote human flourishing, but it also fosters conditions globally that make it easier for Christian churches and

missionaries to reach the lost for the Kingdom of Christ.

As Southern Baptists look to the future, it is important to continue to stand for religious liberty. We should, furthermore, see the pending threats to liberty of conscience as a direct assault on the *imago Dei*. As stewards of our history and heritage, it is incumbent upon Southern Baptists, cooperating together through the ERLC, to contend for this first freedom as an act of love for our neighbors, and for the glory of Christ and his Kingdom. ★

Cory D. Higdon is an adjunct professor of history and humanities at Boyce College.

1 <https://www.clsnet.org/document.doc?id=803>

2 <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/congressional-democrats-reintroduce-do-no-harm-act-n978101>

3 https://erlc.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/ERL3103_LegisAgenda_012523.pdf

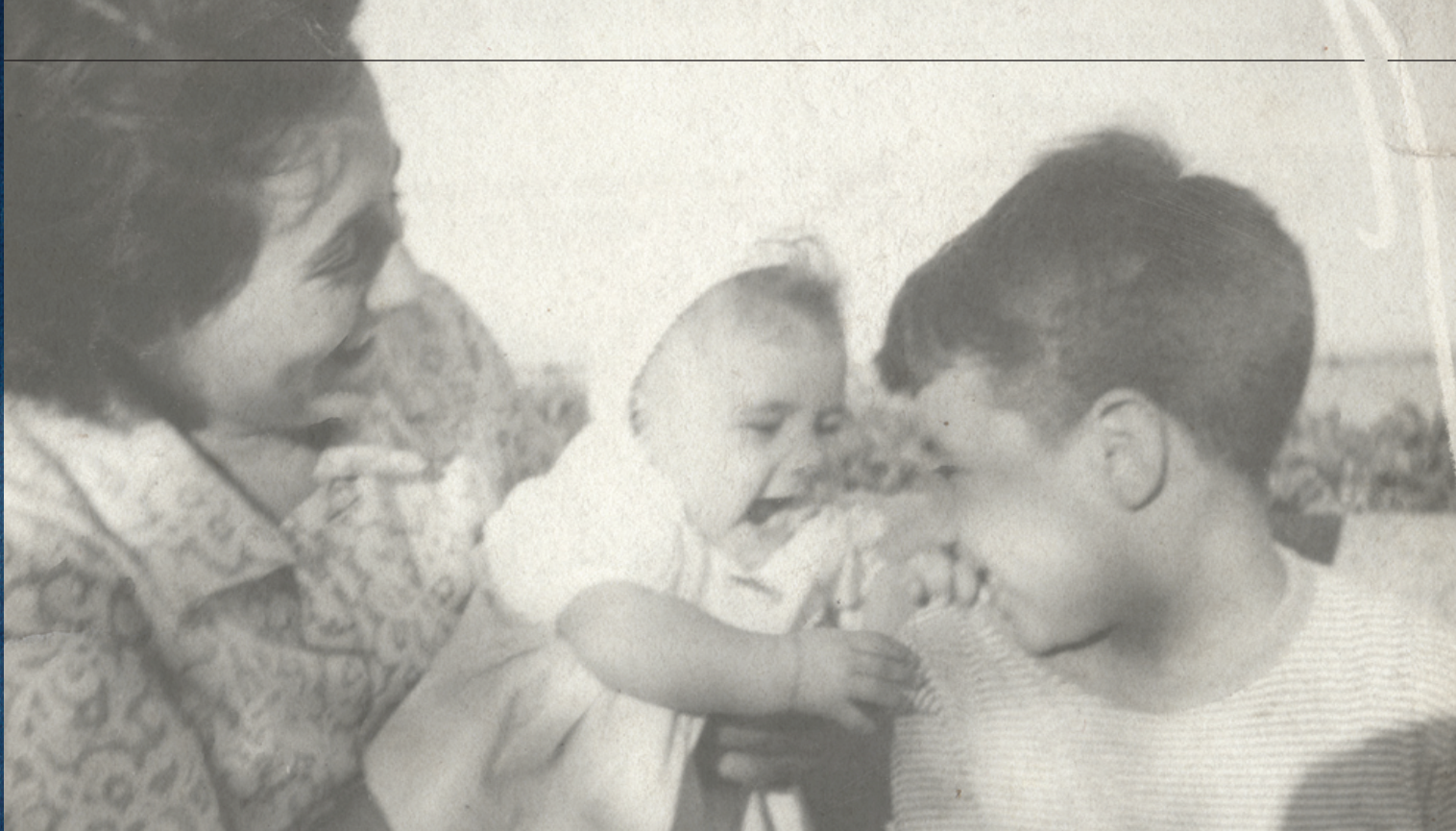
4 <https://erlc.com/resource-library/press-releases/sbcs-richard-land-testifies-in-support-of-workplace-religious-freedom-act/>

5 <https://www.sbc.net/resource-library/resolutions/on-the-uyghur-genocide/>

6 <https://erlc.com/resource-library/press-releases/erlc-commends-congress-on-reaching-agreement-on-uyghur-forced-labor-prevention-act/>

7 <https://erlc.com/resource-library/white-papers/religious-freedom-and-liberty-partnership-in-malaysia/>

8 <https://erlc.com/resource-library/issue-briefs/erlc-supports-freedom-of-religion-and-belief-in-the-democratic-peoples-republic-of-korea-dprk/>



SOUTHERN BAPTISTS AND THE SANCTITY OF LIFE

From Pro-Choice to Unapologetically Pro-Life

Jerry Sutton

TODAY, SOUTHERN BAPTISTS AS a whole are decidedly pro-life, but that was not always the case. In this brief review of Southern Baptists and the pro-life movement, I want to consider the way it was and why; the way it changed and how; and the way it is and why. The Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC), previously named the Christian Life Commission (CLC), engages in pro-life issues on behalf of Southern Baptists and provides the lens through which Southern Baptist involvement in the pro-life movement can be understood.

THE WAY IT WAS AND WHY

How was it that Southern Baptists were, in popular terminology, once pro-choice? Prior to what is known as the Conservative Resurgence, theological moderates (some were legitimately liberal) controlled the machinery of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). This means that trustees and agency personnel were theologically to the left in their orientation. When Foy Valentine became the executive director of the CLC (1960–1987), his four principal issues were to fight racism, fight communism,

promote religious liberty, and oppose the influence of Roman Catholicism. This latter concern helped influence Valentine's beliefs concerning "life" issues. Because Catholics were decidedly pro-life, he opposed it. This colored his belief in being pro-choice and embracing a pro-abortion posture.

Valentine who was a founding member of the Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights was also an active member of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU).¹ These affiliations indicated his sentiments. Being decidedly pro-choice, Valentine used his influence

to promote the popular mantra, “My body, my choice,” and the notion that life does not begin until physical birth. He was also instrumental in 1971 with the SBC passing the first of four resolutions which communicated a pro-choice sentiment. As such, he agreed with the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision on Jan. 22, 1973, of *Roe v. Wade*, and its coordinate decision in *Doe v. Bolton*. Among the Southern Baptist rank and file, however, sentiment was beginning to change. With *Roe*, many who had been neutral or oblivious to the implications of abortion began to see it as a moral evil which needed to be addressed.

THE WAY IT CHANGED AND HOW

A principal influencer among Southern Baptists was Missouri pastor Larry Lewis who eventually became the president of the SBC Home Mission Board. In 1980, as a member of the SBC Resolutions Committee, he wrote the first pro-life resolution approved by the SBC in session. In 1981, while serving as a board member for Southern Baptists for Life, he urged the legislative branch of the U.S. government to pass a pro-life amendment to the U.S. Constitution. This mindset established a new direction for Southern Baptists.

With the election of conservative SBC presidents over the next several years, the trustees of the SBC boards, agencies, and commissions began to change in a convictionally conservative direction. Slowly and methodically, Valentine’s influence began to wane. And by the late 1980s, he was ineffective at representing Southern Baptists in the public policy arena. In 1986, Valentine announced his intention to retire and requested his trustees seek, nominate, and elect his replacement.

Larry Baker became the nominee, and after his election served from 1987 to 1988. He resigned on July 15, 1988. It should be noted that although his abortion posture was less extreme than Valentine’s, he was still too far to the

left and unacceptable to the conservative trustees on the board. Under the leadership of Trustee Chairman Joe Atchison, Richard Land was elected the executive director of the CLC on Oct. 24, 1988.

With the new hope of abolishing abortion on demand as the rule of law, Southern Baptists have continued to stand up for the sanctity of all human life.

THE WAY IT IS, AND WHY

With Land at the helm, the CLC—later named the ERLC—took an unapologetic pro-life posture which has remained consistent under the leadership of Russell Moore, and now, Brent Leatherwood. Land (1988–2013) wasted no time in setting the Commission’s pro-life position. In his installation address, Land declared, “Abortion is perhaps the supreme contemporary example of our need to be salt and light. Since 1973 abortion, the taking of unborn life in the womb has assumed staggering proportions in our society. At least 1.5 million babies a year are being killed because they are considered too expensive, too embarrassing, or too inconvenient. ... We must force people to confront the horror of what they are doing.”

Several years into his tenure, Land spoke to the 1990 convention of the Concerned Women of America where he

stated, “Abortion, as awful as it is, is the thin end of the wedge ... the camel’s nose under the tent. ... We are fighting a culture war over the definition of the nature and value of human life and whether human life is indeed distinct from other life.” He concluded, “The biblical view is that all of life is sacred and begins at conception, and the right to life is a sacred act.” Several years later, when the Supreme Court sustained *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* by a 5-4 majority, Land was livid in his criticism on a decision that had put its stamp of approval on *Roe*.²

What role has the ERLC played in the pro-life movement since the Commission reversed course? From an advocacy perspective, the ERLC has been consistent

in addressing life issues as they arise. From Land’s leadership came a litany of responses to President Bill Clinton’s pro-abortion posture, the endorsement of Mother Teresa’s 1994 prayer breakfast appeal, opposition to the promotion of the RU 486 French abortion pill, condemnation of the partial-birth abortion practice, and decrying the barbaric practice of embryonic research and fetal tissue trafficking.

In 2003, Land promoted the SBC resolution, “On Thirty Years of *Roe v. Wade*,” which concluded with, “Resolved, That we pray and work for the repeal of the *Roe v. Wade* decision and for the day when the act of abortion will not only be illegal, but also unthinkable.”³ Since 1982, over 20 pro-life resolutions have been adopted by the SBC in session.

With the new hope of abolishing abortion on demand as the rule of law, Southern Baptists have continued to stand up for the sanctity of all human life. One avenue of continuous work has been the Psalm 139 Project, “an initiative



designed to make people aware of the life-saving potential of ultrasound technology in unplanned pregnancy situations and to help pregnancy centers minister to abortion-vulnerable women by providing ultrasound equipment for them to use,” which was established under Land in 2004.⁴ In addition, the ERLC advocates yearly for invaluable pro-life riders, or regulations in spending, to be kept in appropriations, which are bills that fund the federal government each year.

In recent years, the ERLC has advocated tirelessly on behalf of specific pro-life initiatives. Key measures have included:

- the defunding of Planned Parenthood—the largest abortion provider and marketer of fetal tissue;⁵
- the effort to advocate for no taxpayer funding for abortion;⁶
- the preservation of the adoption tax credit;⁷
- the appointment of pro-life Supreme Court nominees;⁸
- supporting the adoption of the Pain Capable Unborn-Child Protective Act;⁹
- and encouraging the passing of the Born Alive Abortion Survivors Protection Act.¹⁰

In subsequent years, the pro-life agenda included continuous advocacy for many of the same measures, seeking to prevent the proliferation of chemical abortions,¹¹ and encouraging the overturning of *Roe* in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*.¹²

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

The passage of the *Dobbs* decision sends the matter of abortion back to the states and opens a world of opportunities for pro-life advocacy and ministry. The work and voice of Southern Baptist churches—and Christians everywhere—is critical to establishing a culture of life in our country. Caring for vulnerable children and mothers and engaging in public policy must be a priority for those who hold that every life is made in God’s image. May the ERLC always stand beside Southern Baptists as we collectively speak up for our youngest neighbors, knowing that this battle is ultimately spiritual and depends upon God, who shines his light in the darkness. ★

Jerry Sutton is a professor, retired Southern Baptist pastor, and author.

- 1 <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/conservative-resurgence-focused-sbcs-pro-life-stance/>
- 2 Tom Strode, “Court Reaffirms Roe, Stings Pro-Life Movement,” CLC News, July 6, 1992.
- 3 <https://www.sbc.net/resource-library/resolutions/on-thirty-years-of-roe-v-wade/>
- 4 <https://psalm139project.org/>
- 5 <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/erlc-endorses-bill-to-defund-planned-parenthood/>
- 6 <https://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/the-next-frontier-taxpayer-funded-abortion-on-demand/>
- 7 https://www.google.com/url?q=https://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/why-the-adoption-tax-credit-matters/&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1682969500739400&usg=AOvVawii5aBkioV6Bq_W8MZzF4BE
- 8 <https://erlc.com/resource-library/press-releases/erlc-russell-moore-calls-the-nomination-of-brett-kavanaugh-a-tremendous-choice-for-the-u-s-supreme-court/>
- 9 <https://erlc.com/resource-library/policy-briefs/erlc-supports-pain-capable-unborn-child-protection-act-2/>
- 10 <https://erlc.com/resource-library/policy-briefs/erlc-supports-born-alive-abortion-survivors-protection-act/>
- 11 <https://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/explainer-texas-judge-rules-against-the-abortion-pill/>
- 12 <https://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/erlc-submits-amicus-brief-in-important-abortion-case-at-the-supreme-court/>

MAJOR EVENTS IN THE HISTORY OF THE ERLC

A TIMELINE

- **1908** SBC Committee on Temperance is formed with A.J. Barton as chairman.
- **1913** The SBC establishes the Social Service Commission.
- **1914** A.J. Barton is elected as chairman of the Social Service Commission (SSC).
- **1925** SBC adopts the Baptist Faith and Message (1925) and establishes the Cooperative Program.
- **1936** Committee on Public Relations, which will work with the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, is established.
- **1942** Jesse B. Weatherspoon replaces Barton as Chairman of the Social Service Commission.
- **1943** The SSC receives its first funding from the SBC.
- **1947** Hugh Brimm elected as the first secretary-treasurer for the Social Service Commission
- **1948** The Social Service Commission begins to publish *Light*.
- **1953** **Acker (A.C.) Miller becomes the secretary-treasurer for the Social Service Commission. The Commission is also renamed the Christian Life Commission (CLC).**



Scan to hear A.C. Miller support the Supreme Court's ruling.

- **1954** **The CLC offers a recommendation affirming the Supreme Court's ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*.**

- **1960** **Foy Valentine is elected to lead the Christian Life Commission.**



- **1973** The Supreme Court issues *Roe v. Wade*, creating a federal right to abortion.

- **1987** Larry Baker is elected to lead the Christian Life Commission.

- **1988** Richard Land is elected executive director of the Christian Life Commission.

- **1990** The CLC receives the program assignment previously held by the Baptist Joint Committee.

- **1994** Leland House, the CLC's Washington, D.C., office opens

- **1995** **The SBC adopts the "Resolution on Racial Reconciliation" on the 150th Anniversary of the Southern Baptist Convention.**



- **1996** The Defense of Marriage Act is signed by President Bill Clinton which legally defined marriage as between one man and one woman.

- **1997** **The CLC becomes the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission on June 19, 1997, and Richard Land offers the convention sermon at the SBC's annual meeting.**



Scan to watch Richard Land's SBC Convention sermon.

- **1998** The ERLC launches their website as a means of equipping the church as well as the radio show, "For Faith and Family."

- **1999** The ERLC launches its Research Institute.
- **2000** The SBC adopts the Baptist Faith and Message (2000).
- **2001** Richard Land is appointed by President George W. Bush to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

- **2004** The ERLC places the first two ultrasound machines through its Psalm 139 Project in pregnancy resource centers in Indiana and Texas. Also, the organization launches its national “iVoteValues” campaign to register voters and provide resources to compare the party platforms and candidate positions.



- **2007** Richard Land Center for Cultural Engagement is founded at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.
- **2009** Richard Land is an initial signatory of the Manhattan Declaration, a statement on the sanctity of life, traditional marriage, and religious liberty.

- **2013** Russell Moore is elected as president of the ERLC.

- **2014** The ERLC hosts their first national conference in Nashville, Tennessee, on “The Gospel, Homosexuality and the Future of Marriage.”



- **2015** The Supreme Court issues a ruling in *Obergefell v. Hodges* granting same-sex couples the right to marry.

- **2016** The ERLC hosts the first Evangelicals for Life in conjunction with the March for Life in Washington, D.C.



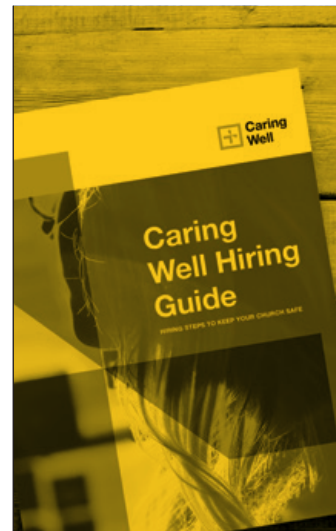
- **2018** The ERLC hosts the MLK50 Conference with The Gospel Coalition marking the 50th anniversary of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.



Scan to watch Russell Moore's address from MLK50.

- **2019** The ERLC releases *Artificial Intelligence: An Evangelical Statement of Principles*. It is the first faith statement of principles on the subject.

- **2019** The *Houston Chronicle* releases their report of sexual abuse within the Southern Baptist Convention, part of the larger #MeToo and #ChurchToo moment. The ERLC responds with the Caring Well national conference focused on the topic of sexual abuse in the church.



- **2020** The ERLC releases the Caring Well Initiative to equip churches in preventing and responding to sexual abuse.

- **2021** The ERLC announces their Road to Roe50 campaign to place 50 ultrasound machines before the 50th anniversary of *Roe v. Wade* in 2023.

- **2022** Brent Leatherwood is elected as president of the ERLC. ★



This timeline is adapted from *A Matter of Conviction: A History of Southern Baptist Engagement with the Culture* by Jerry Sutton (B&H Publishing, 2008).

A VITAL PRESENCE IN WASHINGTON

THE HISTORY OF LELAND HOUSE

Tom Strobe

The full-time presence in Washington, D.C., of Southern Baptists' public policy entity is a recent development historically, but it has become a vital part of the convention's engagement with the federal government.

Today, the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC) represents Southern Baptists from Leland House on Capitol Hill. Almost 34 years after its first full-time Washington staff member came on board, the Commission continues to speak on behalf of Southern Baptists to Congress, the White House, and the U.S. Supreme Court.

The ERLC's main office is in Nashville, Tennessee, but its work and building in Washington have been integral in communicating to federal policymakers where Southern Baptists stand on vital issues.

"The ERLC has a unique calling to serve Southern Baptists on issues of religious freedom, the sanctity of human life, marriage and family, and human dignity," said President Brent Leatherwood, unanimously elected in 2022 as the ninth head of the Commission. "It's through the work of remarkable men and women in our Leland House that we are able to carry out that mission.

"I am eager to witness what we will accomplish together through our advocacy in Washington in the years ahead."

Founded in 1845, the SBC can trace its moral concerns work by means of a formal organization as far back as 1908. Despite the convention's lengthy record of addressing moral concerns, it still had no full-time presence in Washington for 80 years.

EARLY DAYS IN THE WASHINGTON

That changed in 1989.

The year before, Richard Land had become the seventh

executive director (later changed to president) of what was then known as the Christian Life Commission (CLC). His election the result of the SBC's Conservative Resurgence, Land came with a commitment to guide the Commission in a fully pro-life direction and with the recognition a permanent voice in the capital was needed. Previously, CLC staff in Nashville would travel to Washington on occasion. The SBC had urged the Commission in 1987 to open an office in the capital.

"We had to have people in Washington to talk to the congressmen, to be able to talk to them on a daily basis," Land said in recalling that early step in his 25-year administration.

James A. Smith Sr., who was working for a committee in the House of Representatives, became the CLC's first full-time staff member in 1989.

The Commission, however, was prohibited from addressing religious freedom issues because of the SBC's relationship with the Baptist Joint Committee (BJC) on Public Affairs, now the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty. The BJC addressed church-state issues on behalf of several Baptist organizations. The SBC was the committee's largest financial supporter.

"So here we were faced with the impossible task of encouraging people to be Christian citizens, encouraging them to be involved in Christian citizenship but without being able to talk about the Baptist understanding of that with the religious liberty perspective," Land recalled.

The SBC solved that problem by 1990. Continuing disagreement with some of the BJC's actions on church-state issues prompted the messengers to that year's meeting to grant the CLC the authority to advocate for religious liberty on behalf of the SBC. They also transferred more than \$340,000 of the convention's financial support of the committee to the CLC. Messengers eliminated all giving to the BJC the next year and cut all ties to the committee in 1992.

EXPANDING ITS WORK

Freed from its former limitation and with a larger staff beginning in 1990, the CLC expanded its work in the capital.

For instance, it became an important member of a diverse coalition in support of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, which became law in 1993 and remains a vital protection against government discrimination.

The CLC's advocacy in opposition to abortion became a priority of its public policy work. Under Land's leadership, the Commission became an outspoken voice for the preborn and their mothers. SBC messengers had adopted a series of strong pro-life resolutions beginning in 1980. The actions by the SBC and the CLC marked a reversal of pro-choice resolutions in the 1970s and pro-choice advocacy by a previous commission head.

"[T]he pro-life issue was such a key, driving force behind the desire of Southern Baptists to have their voice heard in Washington," Smith said. "[B]ecause of [our] history, Southern Baptists wanted to make clear that we had come to understand this issue and had come to put ourselves in lockstep with the pro-life movement."

It was important to have "someone in Washington on a regular basis who could say, 'Southern Baptists have said over and over again that we believe life begins at conception and that legislation should be pursued to that end'" with the recognition the Supreme Court

needed to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, he said.

"All of that was only possible with a full-time Washington office to speak to those issues."

A PERMANENT PRESENCE

The ERLC has carried out its SBC assignment since 1994 from its permanent office at Leland House. The building, a three-level townhouse on the Senate side of Capitol Hill, is named in honor of John Leland, a Baptist pastor in Colonial America who was instrumental in helping secure religious freedom in the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment.

While leasing space in an office building on Capitol Hill, the Commission received \$300,000 from the SBC Executive Committee in 1993 to buy its own building. That money, which helped pay for the purchase and renovation of the townhouse, came from capital funds set aside in 1964 for "public affairs" in Washington.

**"THE LELAND HOUSE HAS PLAYED
A VITAL ROLE IN OUR WORK IN
WASHINGTON, D.C., FOR MANY
YEARS, PROVIDING A SINGULAR
HOME FOR OUR WORK ON
MATTERS OF PUBLIC POLICY."**

- BRENT LEATHERWOOD



“The Leland House has played a vital role in our work in Washington, D.C., for many years, providing a singular home for our work on matters of public policy,” Leatherwood said. “It is a great building and serves as a vivid reminder of God’s faithful provision to our organization, as well as a representation of the ERLC’s steady presence in our nation’s capital.”

The work of the Commission’s Washington office has included meeting with members of Congress and their staffs, filing and signing onto friend of the court briefs with the Supreme Court, expressing concerns to presidential administrations in person and by public comments, and working in coalitions on a variety of policies. The Commission also has hosted numerous conferences and panel discussions in Washington to further the policy priorities of Southern Baptists.

The issues the Commission’s staff in Washington has addressed in response to SBC convictional expressions have been varied. In addition to abortion and religious liberty, the ERLC has communicated with policymakers regarding such

matters as criminal justice reform, gambling, LGBTQ+ rights, human trafficking, immigration, physician-assisted suicide, pornography, predatory payday lending, refugee resettlement, and religious persecution globally.

The gains supported by the ERLC have included the enactment of the International Religious Freedom Act (1998), Trafficking Victims Protection Act (2000), Partial-birth Abortion Ban Act (2003), First Step Act (2018), and Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act (2021). The Supreme Court has issued a series of opinions in support of religious freedom, as well as the monumental reversal last year of *Roe*.

“[I]t is important to have a Washington presence,” Land said. “It would have been much more difficult for us to do some of the things we’ve done, to have some of the influence we’ve had had we not had a Washington office.” ★

Tom Strobe recently retired from 32 years as the Washington, D.C., bureau chief for Baptist Press.



From Prohibition to Social Concerns

A.J. Barton and the Origins of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission

Alex Ward

Dating the origins of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC) is a fraught task.

If you limit yourself to the name ERLC, then you would go back to 1997 under the presidency of Richard Land. However, Land led the Christian Life Commission from 1988–1997. And if you include those years, then you would need to include the earlier presidents of Larry Baker, (1987–1988), Foy Valentine (1960–1987), Acker (A.C.) Miller (1954–1960), and Hugh Brimm (1947–1954).

The SBC made the Christian Life Commission (CLC) a Cooperative Program (CP) funded entity in 1947, so this would make a natural start. However, Jesse B. Weatherspoon, who led the previous Social Services Commission from 1942–1947 without CP dollars, was the head of the board of trustees for the CLC in 1947. Before that, Arthur J. Barton led the organization through various name changes since 1908.

So, is it a matter of name and ministry assignment (1997), CP funding (1947), or leadership and activity (1908)? While funding and a name are important to an institution, the program of social concern that began under Barton is crucial to understanding the current ministry of the ERLC.

The Crusade Against Liquor

When Barton walked to the stage to deliver the 12th report of the Committee on Temperance and Social Service in 1920 at the annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention, he was ecstatic, among other things, about the domestic victory over the liquor traffic which had been accomplished earlier that year when the 18th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution had gone into effect. This was to be “the greatest victory for industrial economy, moral reform, and sound governmental policy ever won by any people.”¹ While this great victory would be rolled back before the middle of the

next decade, for this moment, Barton could enjoy his work on behalf of the SBC against the liquor trade.

Barton’s century-old speech and the vigor with which he endeavored to ban alcohol can seem quaint to modern readers. Yet, it was this fight that began Southern Baptists’ cohesive social project in the public square. The 1908 committee urging Prohibition quickly began addressing topics such as labor relations, the question of race, and matters of public morality and sexuality.

Barton’s efforts to ban alcohol were the direct outworking of his own belief about its social harms. He spoke of the “traffic in blood and souls” which had to be “utterly banished.”² In his 1916 report, he linked it with “everything evil” as the root and cause of sins such as “child labor, crowded tenements, and the sweat shop.”³

The program of social concern that began under Barton is crucial to understanding the current ministry of the ERLC.

At the same time, there was a growing fear that alcohol was connected to the problem of “white slavery,” a term of the period which referred to the fear that young white women were being trafficked and forced into prostitution by the influx of immigrants.⁴ In the face of such an evil, Barton said Christians ought to “feel their responsibility in civic and governmental affairs.”⁵

Though the Temperance Committee, Committee on Temperance and Social Service, and the Social Service Commission (various names for the organization led by Barton between 1908–1942), never received funding from the Southern Baptist Convention, *it was the first formal effort at a social program in the public square.*

Significant Leaders



Arthur James Barton 1908-1942

Barton was the first and longest serving head of the organization that preceded the CLC/ERLC. He worked, without convention pay, for over three decades. It

was not until after his death that the commission received funding (\$1,000 in 1943, and a percentage of Cooperative Program funds in 1947). This makes the work he and the standing committee accomplished all the more remarkable.



Jesse Weatherspoon 1942-1947

Weatherspoon served as the second commission leader. A professor of homiletics at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Weatherspoon was known for

his advocacy on the issue of race relations. He called for a Special Committee on Race Relations (1946), the first Social Service Commission conference on social concerns (1946), and the publication of a number of handbooks and tracts related to racial justice issues. At his urging, the Executive Committee reevaluated the role of the Commission and eventually decided to fund the organization out of the Cooperative Program.



Hugh Brimm 1947-1953

Brimm served as the first Secretary-Treasurer of the Social Service Commission (SSC). Though his tenure was brief, it included several major milestones,

including the first issue of *Light*. Like Weatherspoon, Brimm emphasized the importance of addressing the question of racial injustice in the South. In his final speech before the convention, he highlighted the growing threat of militarism and made reference to the need for Southern Baptists to integrate their schools.



A.C. Miller 1953-1960

Just prior to Miller's tenure as secretary-treasurer, the SSC was renamed the Christian Life Commission (CLC) and the headquarters moved to Nashville,

Tennessee. Miller's first address at the 1954 annual meeting encouraged the convention to affirm the recent *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling. The theme of racial justice and integration continued during his presidency, prompting significant resistance from some Southern Baptists.



Foy Valentine 1960-1987

Valentine was a vocal supporter of racial justice in the SBC. Though correct on race, he also represented the drift left of the convention and was a member of the moderate

wing which prompted the Conservative Resurgence in the 1970s and 1980s within the Southern Baptist Convention.



Larry Baker 1987-1988

Baker served the shortest tenure leading the CLC. Chosen to replace Foy Valentine, Baker enjoyed little support from the growing conservative segment on his board, narrowly

avoiding being dismissed from the position in his first year. Like Valentine, he was noted for his support of abortion. Knowing he would be dismissed when the conservatives had a majority, he resigned after only 19 months.



Richard Land 1988-2013

Richard Land was the final president of the CLC and the first of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC).

Land emphasized new media avenues, including regular television appearances, a daily radio show, and the launch of a website. He was essential in the crafting of the 1995 Resolution on Racial Reconciliation. He also emphasized the role that the Commission had for protecting religious liberty, particularly after the name change in 1997. Major initiatives include: the launch of the Psalm 139 Project to place ultrasound machines in pregnancy resource centers and work with the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.



Russell Moore 2013-2021

Russell Moore's tenure at the ERLC continued the work of previous administrations in pro-life advocacy and racial justice. At the same time, it reckoned with new challenges

of sexuality such as the *Obergefell* decision legalizing same sex marriage. Under the Moore administration, the ERLC hosted the first Evangelicals for Life conference in conjunction with the annual March for Life in Washington, D.C., co-hosted the MLK50 conference urging evangelicals to grapple with racial injustice, and the launch of the Road to Roe50 to place 50 ultrasound machines in pregnancy resource centers across the country.

From Prohibition to Social Concerns

While the Committee under Barton was focused primarily on the problem of alcohol, his agenda expanded significantly following the success (and later failure) of Prohibition.

Religious liberty

One of the causes that began to show up in the reports of the Social Service Commission was religious liberty. There were positive and negative aspects to this inclusion.

Positively, it took the form of the defense of persecuted Christians abroad,

Barton argued in his 1931 report for the right to unionize or not, limits on the workday and workweek, opposition to the employment of children in certain professions, and safe, sanitary working conditions in factories.

such as in the 1922 address which spoke of the “atrocities against Christians in the Near East.”⁶ Additionally, his 1929 report included a prolonged discussion of “The Relation of Government and Religion” in which he decried the attempts to bring forth religion through force: “... the bloodiest crimes of the ages have been committed in the name of religion when both church and state have been prostituted by an unholy and adulterous alliance.”⁷

And yet, Barton’s was not an unlimited defense of religious liberty, his rhetoric often tinged with anti-Catholic sentiment, as in his criticism of Al Smith, presidential nominee for the Democratic Party in 1928. He spoke of the Vatican and closed with the declaration that Baptists must protect the heritage of church-state separation handed down to them and never “submit to any combination of religious influence and political power or manipulation that will in any wise menace this heritage.”⁸

Industrial relations

Another issue which proved influential for later work was that of industrial relations. Barton argued in his 1931 report for a number of rights for workers: the right to unionize or not, limits on the workday and workweek, opposition to the employment of children in certain professions, and safe, sanitary working conditions in factories.

Barton did not wish to set labor and management against one another. However, he did emphasize the need for industry to provide for its workers in a fair and judicious manner. He concluded by asking that the convention implement across various state conventions the work

that was being done in North Carolina and Georgia to make the industrial sector conform to the Golden Rule.⁹

Race

The last major area where Barton sought to influence the convention was on the topic of race. In this area, the results are mixed, at best. His 1920 convention speech closed with the “race question.” He called for a host of social programs to assist African Americans such as better economic opportunity, justice in court, and racial sympathy.

Further, his 1928 report began with condemning the evil of lynching and mob violence, and how the recorded vigilante executions of the past year had occurred within the bounds of the SBC.¹⁰ Barton called on the convention to uphold the rule of law and be ready to defend, by either moral or physical support, due process under the law.

At the same time, Barton was not an integrationist and condemned as a fool’s errand any attempt to change the separation between African Americans and Anglo Americans. He argued that the thoughtful of neither race desired integration, reflecting the segregationist perspective of many Southerners at the time, even as he offered economic support. He called on Southern Baptists to help African Americans, recognizing “many ways” to do this including the financial support of the American Baptist College in Nashville, Tennessee.¹¹

Conclusion

In the end, Barton’s efforts would prove unsuccessful in the cause against the sale of liquor. However, the committee that he led for over three decades until his death in 1942 would prove incredibly important in the coming decades as Southern Baptists’ voice of public concern.

Barton never saw the committee receive funding from the SBC. His successor, Jesse Weatherspoon, would receive the first official funds from the SBC, and the organization would eventually become an entity of the Cooperative Program under the leadership of Hugh Brimm, its first president. However, all of this was largely due to the hard work of Arthur James Barton and his long, unpaid service to the denomination. ★

Alex Ward is the lead researcher for the ERLC.

1 *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention (1920)* (Nashville, TN: Marshall & Bruce Co., 1920).

2 *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention (1911)* (Nashville, TN: Marshall & Bruce Co., 1911), 55.

3 *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention (1916)* (Nashville, TN: Marshall & Bruce Co., 1916), 73.

4 Norman Clark, *Deliver Us From Evil: An Interpretation of American Prohibition* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 1976), 103–4.

5 *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention (1912)* (Nashville, TN: Marshall & Bruce Co., 1912), 76.

6 *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention (1922)* (Nashville, TN: Marshall & Bruce Co., 1922), 100.


7 *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention (1929)* (Nashville, TN: Marshall & Bruce Co., 1929), 89.

8 *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention (1929)*, 90.

9 *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention (1931)* (Nashville, TN: Marshall & Bruce Co., 1931), 121.

10 *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention (1928)* (Nashville, TN: Marshall & Bruce Co., 1928), 84.

11 *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention (1920)*, 97.



The Path Forward for the ERLC

WHAT A CHANGING CULTURE
MEANS FOR THE FUTURE



As the future unfolds, the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission will continue to proclaim boldly what God's Word teaches about human dignity, marriage and family, religious liberty, and the sanctity of life in the public square. However, a world with ever-changing ideologies means new questions and challenges must be addressed. In this series of articles, experts survey what's looming on the horizon and how these precious and unchanging truths anchor our work.





A Bioethicist Looks Toward the Future of Human Dignity

RECOVERING THREE PILLARS
OF A TRULY HUMAN SOCIETY

C. Ben Mitchell

In a scathing criticism of the President's Council on Bioethics under the Bush administration, Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker said in a 2008 edition of the *New Republic* magazine, "The problem is that 'dignity' is a squishy, subjective notion, hardly up to the heavy-weight moral demands assigned to it." This was indicative of a future that will require almost no end to shoring up the pillars of human dignity.

To that end, three important renovation projects come to mind as necessary for a truly human future where inherent value is understood and celebrated: the reclamation of theological anthropology, the reappropriation of Christian-Hippocraticism in medicine, and a recommitment to the Great Commandment.

Reclamation of Theological Anthropology

Reclamation of theological anthropology is the first priority in understanding, celebrating, and protecting human dignity.

Since at least 1948, with the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the notion of human dignity has been enshrined in international jurisprudence, treaties, and policy. One of the chief architects of the declaration was the formidable Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain who described it as "the preface to a moral Charter of the civilized world." Yet despite his erudition, when Maritain was asked about the declaration's appeal for the protection of human rights he famously replied, "We agree about the rights but on condition no one asks us why!"

Christian theological anthropology answers the "why" of human rights by pointing to the "Who."

Only human beings are made in God's own image, and Jesus, fully God and fully man, sacralized our embodied humanity in his incarnation. Human rights, including the rights to life, liberty, equality, privacy, non-discrimination, etc., do not derive merely from a social contract but from the investiture of the God who made us and the Messiah who lived

among us as a human person, was crucified, raised from the dead, and will return one day. We may happily use the publicly accessible language of human dignity, but Jews and Christians confess that human dignity has a divine origin.

Furthermore, as theologian Kelly Kopic reminds us in his recent volume, *You're Only Human*, Christian theological anthropology teaches us that to be human is to be embodied, limited, dependent, relational, and much more.¹ These necessary aspects of our humanity are divine gifts and human goods to be celebrated, protected, and cultivated from conception to natural death. Only a robust theological anthropology can anchor the notion of human dignity against the tsunami of late modernity.

Reappropriation of the Christian Hippocratic Tradition

A second pillar supporting human dignity is Christian-Hippocraticism in medicine. Unfortunately, medical ethics too often focuses on moral dilemmas or public policy debates. We almost never ask the question, "What is medicine for?"

The Hippocratic tradition of the medical profession begins with the famous—but by now hardly ever recited—oath that acknowledges divine obligations and pledges as its first principle to "do no harm." Down the ages, Christians appropriated and revised the oath for its affirmation of the patient as a person, the physician as a professional, and the practice of medicine obliging a responsibility to serve the common good, especially for the vulnerable who are suffering from illness and disease.

Today, patients have become customers, physicians providers, and medicine a consumer good. If we are to answer accurately the question, "What is medicine for?" we must resist a provider-of-services model—with its terrible implications—and reappropriate the Christian virtues of medicine.² Physicians are not healthcare "providers;" they are professionals who should pledge to use their extensive training, wisdom of experience, and virtuous

ethical judgment to help “patients” (literally, “sufferers”)—not customers or clients—mitigate, recover from, or face the fragility of our fallen humanity.

The profession of medicine can serve our common humanity by treating every patient as a possessor of human dignity, regardless of one’s age, state of health, or ability to pay. This also means that physicians should not kill their patients at the beginning of life or at the end of life. They should not mutilate bodies through transgender surgeries or grotesque “aesthetic” modifications, even if the patient requests it. Medicine should not cater to customer satisfaction but serve truly human goods to continue to be worthy of public trust.

Recommitment to the Great Commandment

Finally, another pillar on which human dignity rests is the Great Commandment—to love God with all one’s heart, mind,

Only a robust theological anthropology can anchor the notion of human dignity against the tsunami of late modernity.



soul, and body, and one’s neighbor as oneself (Matt. 22:36-40). Love of neighbor has been the origin of many of the practices and institutions that respect, defend, and protect human dignity. For instance, the modern hospital system owes its existence to people of faith, love of God, and love of neighbor. Rabbinic sources often cite the second-century B.C. book of *Ecclesiasticus* as a reminder that medicine owes its origins to God:

“Honour a physician with the honour due unto him for the uses which ye

may have of him: for the Lord hath created him. For of the most High cometh healing, and he shall receive honour of the king. The skill of the physician shall lift up his head: and in the sight of great men he shall be in admiration. The Lord hath created medicines out of the earth; and he that is wise will not abhor them” (38:1-4 KJV).

Christians have been leaders in medicine and in the building of hospitals because Jesus of Nazareth healed the sick and disabled.

Early Greeks and Romans made great contributions to medicine, but, as late University of Washington historian of medicine Albert Jonsen said in his *A Short History of Medical Ethics*, “the second great sweep of medical history begins at the end of the fourth century, with the founding of the first Christian hospital at Caesarea in Cappadocia, and concludes at the end of the fourteenth century, with medicine well ensconced in the universities and in the public life of the emerging nations of Europe.”³

This extraordinary, formative period in medicine was characterized by the Church’s intimate involvement. Jonsen argues,

During these centuries the Christian faith ... permeated all aspects of life in the West. The very conception of medicine, as well as its practice, was deeply touched by the doctrine and discipline of the Church. This theological and ecclesiastical influence manifestly shaped the ethics of medicine, but it even indirectly affected its science since, as its missionaries evangelized the peoples of Western and Northern Europe, the Church found itself in a constant battle against the use of magic and superstition in the work of healing. It championed rational medicine, along with prayer, to counter superstition.

As a means of caring for those who were ill, St. Basil of Caesarea founded

the first hospital (c. 369), and Christian hospitals grew apace, spreading throughout both the East and the West. By the mid-1500s, there were 37,000 Benedictine monasteries alone that cared for the sick.

Furthermore, as Charles Rosenberg shows in his volume, *The Care of Strangers: The Rise of America’s Hospital System*, the modern hospital owes its origins to Judeo-Christian compassion.⁴ Evidence of the vast expansion of faith-based hospitals is seen in the legacy of their names: St. Vincent’s, St. Luke’s, Mt. Sinai, Presbyterian, Mercy, and Beth Israel. These were all charitable hospitals, some of which began as founding hospitals to care for abandoned children.

Similarly, in Europe, great hospitals were built under the auspices of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Indeed, an ancient French term for hospital is *hôtel-Dieu* (“hostel of God”). In 1863, the *Société Genevoise d’Utilité Publique* called on Swiss Christian businessman Jean Henri Dunant to form a relief organization for caring for wartime wounded. Thus, the emblem of the Red Cross was codified in the Geneva Convention a year later. And in Britain, Dame Cicely Saunders founded the hospice movement by establishing St. Christopher’s Hospice in the south of London in 1967.

These three pillars are reminders that human dignity is not an abstract concept to be protected, but a way of referring to the sacred value of real, living, embodied people made in the image of God. The future will demand that Southern Baptists and other Christians excavate, recover, and renovate these three pillars if human dignity is to stand. ★

C. Ben Mitchell is a research fellow of the ERLC.

1 Kelly Kapic, *You’re Only Human* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2022).

2 Farr Curlin and Christopher Tollefsen, *The Way of Medicine* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2021).

3 Albert Jonsen, *A Short History of Medical Ethics* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2000), 13.

4 Charles Rosenberg, *The Care of Strangers: The Rise of America’s Hospital System* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).



Contending for the Next Generation

MEETING CHALLENGES FOR FAMILIES
WITH A FAITHFUL WITNESS

Christiana Kiefer

I am the way, the truth, and the life,” Jesus famously told his disciples—a description that points to his identity and how we can best share him with others. Christ has given his Church the privilege and responsibility of proclaiming the good news of the gospel while caring for our neighbors, speaking up for the vulnerable, and advocating for human flourishing in every arena of life.

But that not only means actively living out our faith, but preserving our freedom to do so, even in the face of growing opposition.

My work with Alliance Defending Freedom—a global Christian legal ministry committed to advancing each person’s God-given right to live and speak the truth—gives me a front-row seat to

the challenges people of faith across the country face.

It also gives me a profound appreciation for groups like the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC) who are working alongside us to protect the dignity and freedoms of all Americans. Together, we look forward, preparing for new challenges and thoughtfully evaluating where best to engage so that we can promote human flourishing and seek the welfare of our communities, marriages, and families.

Challenges to Flourishing Families

We are well aware of the challenges in the pro-life space, which affects the health of families. The overturning¹ of *Roe v. Wade* was extraordinary, but there is still much work to be done. Pro-life pregnancy

centers (PRCs) and churches have been attacked,² some churches are being compelled³ to cover abortions in their health insurance plans, and PRCs are even being forced to promote abortion.⁴ In addition, the federal government is making chemical abortions⁵ increasingly available—even while removing crucial safeguards.

But the denigration of life doesn’t stop with mothers and babies.

Licensed professionals are under government pressure on other fronts. In Washington and other states, Christian counselors who want to help minors achieve their goal of living at peace with their sex are forbidden by law from even having these conversations about gender identity.⁶ A counselor’s failure to comply can mean costly fines and even the loss of their counseling license, despite growing scientific evidence that physical and social “transition” can lead to physical and emotional devastation.

Similar intrusions on both religious freedom and the health and well-being of children are having an impact on more and more families throughout the country. The Biden administration, for instance, is using agency regulations to circumvent U.S. Supreme Court decisions protecting families and children.⁷

In several states, government officials have also tried to shut down Christian adoption and foster-care providers who want to place children with a married mother and father.⁸ And other states have denied Christian parents the opportunity to provide vulnerable children with a loving home, simply because agency officials object to the parents’ religious beliefs.

Other youth are being denied not only fair competition but physical safety as young women and girls are facing males in their sports—costing these female athletes competitions, titles, and potential scholarships. Schools like Mid-Vermont Christian School⁹ that refuse to embrace gender ideology or the risks to their female athletes¹⁰ are being entirely excluded¹¹ from state athletic competition.

Increasingly, our government is moving to compel women to share private facilities like restrooms, locker rooms, and dorm bedrooms with males.¹² Other federal agencies have gone so far as to require employers to pay for—and religious healthcare providers to perform—life-altering surgeries for patients tragically convinced they can change their sex.¹³

Meanwhile, a new law threatens to strip custody from caring parents if, without their approval, their child travels or is taken to California for experimental “gender transition” drugs and irreversible surgeries that can have lifelong consequences.¹⁴

Government intrusions are endangering children’s minds, as well as their bodies. In many parts of the country, federal, state, and local authorities are actively working to curb parental rights and a biblical view of gender and sexuality.

Last year, a determined effort by some Virginia public school administrators regarding gender ideology drew national attention.¹⁵ Their policies compelled teachers to affirm and support ideas contrary to their deeply held moral, philosophical, and religious beliefs. That prompted a group of religiously diverse parents to challenge the discriminatory policies and radical indoctrination in court.

These are just some of the challenges now facing a growing number of Christian families—and those of other faiths—across our nation.

How Christians Can Respond

What can churches and organizations like the ERLC do?

Awareness: We can be aware—and make others aware—of what’s happening in the culture, the courts, and the political landscape. We can be more responsible citizens, doing the sometimes tedious homework of learning what candidates believe,

what important legislation really means, what ideologies are gathering momentum, and then voting accordingly.

Support: We can make phone calls, send emails, write letters to the editor. We can actively and generously support the work of organizations like the ERLC, enabling them to more effectively advocate before government officials for the best interests of families.

Invest: We can invest more thoughtfully, patiently, and lovingly in the lives of our children—and our communities—

It also gives me a profound appreciation for groups like the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission who are working alongside us to protect the dignity and freedoms of all Americans.



carefully deepening their understanding of what the Bible teaches, including how to effectively engage our cherished freedoms for the benefit of ourselves and others.

Pray: Most of all, we can pray.

May God, in the words of a great old hymn,¹⁶ “grant us wisdom, grant us courage, for the living of these days,” as we continue to live as Southern Baptists blessed with a long history of commitment to religious freedom, as citizens offering those around us a testimony to the transcendent truth of Christ, and as parents and individuals seeking to sow the truth of God’s Word deep in the souls of the next generation. ★

1 “What You Need to Know About the Biggest Abortion Case Since *Roe v. Wade*,” Alliance Defending Freedom, February 8, 2023, <https://adfflegal.org/article/what-you-need-know-about-one-biggest-abortion-cases-roe-v-wade>.

2 Jonah McKeown, “TRACKER: Pro-abortion attacks in the U.S. continue (updated),” March 20, 2022, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/251553/map-vandalism-attacks-continue-at-pro-life-centers-across-us>.

3 “Skyline Wesleyan Church Sued California for Forcing It to Pay for Abortions,” Alliance Defending Freedom, October 26, 2022, <https://adfflegal.org/article/church-sued-california-forcing-it-pay-abortion-its-healthcare-plan>.

4 “Victory! Connecticut Pro-Life Pregnancy Center Won’t Be Forced to Speak Against Its Mission,” Alliance Defending Freedom, July 11, 2022, <https://adfflegal.org/article/victory-pro-life-pregnancy-center-wont-be-forced-speak-against-its-mission>.

5 Grant Atkinson, “The FDA Won’t Stop Pushing Abortion Drugs,” Alliance Defending Freedom, February 8, 2023, <https://adfflegal.org/article/fda-wont-stop-pushing-abortion-drugs>.

6 Roger Brooks, “Tingley V. Ferguson,” Alliance Defending Freedom, March 27, 2023, <https://adfflegal.org/case/tingley-v-ferguson>.

7 Matt Bowman, “How the Biden Administration Is Using Regulations to Erode Religious Freedom,” Alliance Defending Freedom, March 13, 2023, <https://adfflegal.org/article/how-biden-administration-using-regulations-erode-religious-freedom>.

8 “What You Need to Know About the Supreme Court’s Foster Care Case,” Alliance Defending Freedom, July 11, 2022, <https://adfflegal.org/article/what-you-need-know-about-foster-care-case-supreme-court>.

9 Ryan Gaydos, “Vermont Christian school barred from future tournaments after forfeiting game against team with trans student,” Fox News, March 14, 2023, <https://www.foxnews.com/sports/vermont-christian-school-barred-future-tournaments-forfeiting-game-against-team-trans-student>.

10 Maureen Collins, “Why Male Athletes Who Identify as Transgender Should Not Compete in Women’s Sports,” Alliance Defending Freedom, March 10, 2023, <https://adfflegal.org/article/why-male-athletes-who-identify-transgender-should-not-compete-womens-sports>.

11 Jesse O’Neill, “Girls basketball team banned from competing after forfeiting to team with trans player,” New York Post, March 14, 2023, <https://nypost.com/2023/03/14/mid-vermont-christian-school-banned-after-forfeiting-to-team-with-trans-player/>.

12 Matt Bowman, “How the Biden Administration Is Using Regulations to Erode Religious Freedom,” Alliance Defending Freedom, February 8, 2023, <https://adfflegal.org/article/federal-agencies-redefining-sex-employers>.

14 Matt Sharp, “California Thinks It Can Raise Your Kids Better Than You Can,” Alliance Defending Freedom, September 8, 2022, <https://adfflegal.org/article/california-thinks-it-can-raise-your-kids-better-you-can>.

15 Tyson Langhofer, “Cross v. Loudoun County School Board,” Alliance Defending Freedom, March 16, 2023, <https://adfflegal.org/case/cross-v-loudoun-county-school-board>.

16 “God of Grace and Glory,” HymnTime, <http://www.hymntime.com/tch/htm/g/o/d/g/godgragrl.htm>.

Christiana Kiefer is senior counsel with the Center for Conscience Initiatives at Alliance Defending Freedom.



The Future of Religious Liberty Advocacy

THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL, THE STATE'S LIMITATIONS, AND HUMAN FLOURISHING

Casey McCall

One cannot tell the story of religious liberty in America apart from Baptists. From Roger Williams and John Clarke in 17th-century New England to Isaac Backus and John Leland in post-Revolutionary America, Baptists have historically insisted that each individual is accountable to God alone for religious conviction, that conscience is the God-given mechanism through which God guides a person to act on those convictions, and that the state cannot coerce religion.

Baptists and Religious Liberty Advocacy

Based on these beliefs, Baptists have not argued merely for *toleration*, wherein the state allows objectionable religious beliefs and chooses to restrain religious punishment, but for full *religious liberty*, wherein the state has no authority to decree religion whatsoever, leaving such matters to individual conscience. Throughout history, Baptists have recognized religious conviction under the domain of God alone, making religious

liberty a God-ordained right and not the prerogative of legislative discretion.

While some have claimed such beliefs derive from the 18th-century Enlightenment, the Baptist witness to religious liberty predates that philosophical movement. Additionally, arguments for religious liberty can be located all the way back to the Patristic era of the Church.¹ If anything, Enlightenment theorists drew inspiration from the Baptist struggle.

The Baptist argument for religious liberty stems primarily from Baptist covenant theology that prioritizes the new covenant in Christ as the high point of biblical revelation. Baptists insist on religious liberty for the same reason we insist on believer's baptism—each covenant member must be born of the Spirit from above (John 3:1–8). Neither parents nor the state can enforce that supernatural transaction, and attempts at coercion lead to false professions of faith, which mars the witness of the Church.

Baptists have therefore maintained that government rightly functions when it allows all religious expression to operate freely without interference. In such a

context, only the Church wields weapons of warfare capable of destroying strongholds (2 Cor. 10:4).

The Future Of Religious Liberty Advocacy

Since its inception in 1845, the Southern Baptist Convention has hardly wavered in its commitment to religious liberty for all. Before 1990 the SBC's public policy goals were split between the Baptist Joint Commission, which specialized in religious liberty concerns, and the Christian Life Commission, which advocated for biblical ethics on behalf of Southern Baptists. However, since the early 1990s, both aims have been carried forward under the mission of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC).

However, each new generation presents its own unique challenges to biblical orthodoxy and ethics because the forces of evil never rest in their attempt to undermine God's purposes. Religious liberty, enjoyed in the United States since 1833 when Massachusetts became the last state to disestablish religion, has only persisted in the face of innumerable challenges

thanks to unwavering advocacy in courtrooms and in the broader culture.

Challenges Over the Last Century

Over the past century, challenges to religious liberty have typically come from the cultural Left as opponents have sought to contest traditional religious expression in the courts. Many have misread the U.S. Constitution's establishment clause as a ban on religion from the public square. However, the establishment clause does not ban religious people from policy debates or forbid the state from legislating policies that are in accordance with biblical values. Instead, America's founding generation sought to ensure that the U.S. never establish religion by law, leaving each citizen free to follow his or her own conscience.

As Richard John Neuhaus observed nearly four decades ago, there's no such thing as a truly "naked" public square. He insightfully observed, "When recognizable religion is excluded, the vacuum will be filled by *ersatz* religion, by religion bootlegged into public space under other names."² Challenges to free expression of religion are often subtle attempts to institute various secular orthodoxies in their place. The ERLC has typically needed to defend the establishment clause on the one hand while fighting for the right of citizens to freely practice and express their faith in the public square on the other.

These kinds of challenges will inevitably persist as the culture's ideology continues to trend away from biblical orthodoxy, and the importance of the ERLC's mission will only increase against the emboldened secular Left.

A New Source of Challenge to Religious Liberty

However, a new battlefield is forming for Christian advocates of religious liberty, and the source of opposition may be surprising to some. As culture drifts radically leftward, many Evangelicals are attacking the idea of religious liberty

from the other side. This group wants to put new covenant wine into old covenant wineskins by linking the mission of God to the secular state. The continual secularization of American culture proves, they argue, that the American project of recognizing universal liberty of conscience has failed. Some hope for government assistance to bolster the Church's mission and boost her power.

Many of our Baptist predecessors longed for religious liberty because they were confident that, freed to preach the gospel, churches would convert people from every nation to Christ.



Here's the question the SBC will need to ask as we turn toward the future: As we depend on the state to fulfill its God-given mandate of upholding justice and order in society, do we really want to tie the Church's mission to political power?

Why are we so mesmerized by the prospect of defeating our political enemies to win a culture war when we already follow the One who reigns "above all rule and authority and power and dominion" (Eph. 1:21)? The cry to abandon religious liberty reveals a crisis of confidence in the Spirit-filled Church's ability to fulfill its Christ-given mission and stands in stark contrast to the foundational Baptist belief of "soul freedom."

Many of our Baptist predecessors longed for religious liberty because they were confident that, freed to preach the gospel, churches would convert people from every nation to Christ. They saw the folly of showing up to wrestle "the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places"

(Eph. 6:12) by wielding the impotent sword of the state, and, instead, doubled down on preaching, sending missionaries, and loving their neighbors by fighting for justice in the name of Christ.³

They looked at a world run by government-established churches and saw a lack of spiritual vitality often resulting from abandonment of the gospel in favor of temporal power. They understood the qualitative difference between the self-sacrificial service that characterizes Christ's Kingdom and the lord-it-over-you oppression of Gentile rulers (Mark 10:35-45).

Baptists have often responded to loss of cultural power by rallying behind the triumphant power of the cross.

So, instead of giving in to fear amidst the uncertainty of our day and looking to the state for answers, Baptists should look to their forebearers. These men and women

rightly distrusted the ability of the state to accomplish lasting spiritual good and instead united behind the apostles in pursuit of the Church's disciple-making mission. May we do the same, looking forward to the day our King returns to judge and to rule (Matt. 28:18-20).

In this vein, may the ERLC continue to persistently remind Southern Baptists of the gospel's power, even as it continues to lead the way in contending for justice and universal human flourishing in service to the advancement of God's Kingdom. ★

Casey McCall is lead pastor at Ashland Community Church in Oldham County, Kentucky.

¹ See, Robert Louis Wilken, *Liberty in the Things of God: The Christian Origins of Religious Freedom* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2019).

² Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984), 80.

³ See, Aaron Menikoff, *Politics and Piety: Baptist Social Reform in America, 1770-1860* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2014).



Carrying on a Pro-Life Legacy

THE CHURCH'S CALLING TO CARE FOR
VULNERABLE WOMEN AND CHILDREN

Lauren McAfee

The June 2022 *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* U.S. Supreme Court decision brought renewed interest to our country's engagement with the abortion issue. National conversations have led to more discussions about abortion at the local level and increased action within churches and communities. I have heard that pregnancy resource center directors report an increase in donors and volunteers, adoption agencies report seeing more couples beginning the steps in the adoption process, and churches are asking how they might engage.

With a flurry of important and beautiful activities going on around the

country, it is also paramount to consider the entire landscape of this movement and what the Church's role should be in the future.

Abortion is Occurring Less, But is Still Accessible

Based on one survey of abortion numbers in the six months following the *Dobbs* decision, there were an average of 5,377 fewer abortions per month. The *Dobbs* decision has secured greater protections for the preborn in our country, and every life saved should be celebrated. Yet, we also need to recognize that abortion is still widely accessible. And while the overall number of abortions per

month decreased, chemical abortions and abortion tourism have increased.¹

The increase in telehealth abortion appointments has allowed for a chemical abortion to be prescribed to a woman without her ever leaving her house. By early 2022, chemical abortion accounted for at least 54.4% of all abortions.² Chemical abortions, which consist of two pills taken a few days apart, can be mailed across state lines, making it incredibly hard to regulate.

In states with abortion restrictions, women are traveling to neighboring states that provide access to abortion (i.e., abortion tourism). The states that saw the greatest increases were those

that border states with greater abortion restrictions or abortion bans. States like California and New York have also seen a greater number of abortions per month than before *Dobbs*.³

Court Decisions are Good, But We Must Reach Hearts and Lives

Affecting change at the policy level is important in combating abortion. However, while abortion remains legal in parts of our country, the Church must have a robust vision for caring for the vulnerable. While we advocate for and applaud

among the first to found an orphanage in America.⁶ Believers have always stepped into the challenges of women and children who are in need.

In the same spirit, research of Christian engagement today found that believers are more likely to be generous with their resources in order to serve those in poverty and need.⁷ Additionally, Christians in America are nearly three times more likely than the general population to pursue foster care or adoption.⁸ The Church today must not only continue this trend, but

If the Church is to reach out and meet women where they are, we must ask: Who are the women most likely to be seeking abortion services? Based on demographic data from 2022 of women who have recently had abortions, 69.8% of all abortions in America involve minority women, while 30.2% of abortions involve white women.⁹ This data is striking considering that the general population of women of reproductive age are 43% minority and 57% white.¹⁰ Additionally, 54% of post-abortive women identify as Christian, and three-fourths of abortion patients were considered low income, with 49% living at less than the federal poverty level.¹¹

In order to connect with abortion-minded women, the Church must build bridges with and care for these women, ready to step in and show the love of Christ while pointing to truth and lovingly walking alongside her. Christians have a unique opportunity to carry on the legacy of caring for the vulnerable. May future reports of the Church today show that same kind of gospel-focused, radical service to those in need. ★

Lauren McAfee is an author and the founder of *Life Collective, Inc.*

In order to connect with abortion-minded women, the Church must build bridges with and care for these women, ready to step in and show the love of Christ while pointing to truth and lovingly walking alongside her.



good laws and legislative advances, we must also develop discipleship strategies that help change people's attitudes and behaviors toward a pro-life ethic and provide practical and spiritual care for children, vulnerable mothers, and families.

For millennia, the Christian Church has cared for the vulnerable out of the conviction that God created every individual in his image, therefore they have innate dignity (Gen. 1). In the early Church, Christians valued the sanctity of life and saved unwanted babies that were thrown out into the trash heaps. These babies were left abandoned to either die or be taken by slave traders who would sell them for profit.⁴

There are also many orphanages that were started by Christians for the sake of caring for children in need, like Christian missionary George Mueller who served over 10,000 orphans in his lifetime.⁵ Or, evangelist George Whitefield who was

deepen its commitment to caring well for those in challenging circumstances facing unplanned pregnancies.

How the Church Can Love the Abortion-Minded Neighbor

In this moment, our churches ought to be motivated by our calling to love our neighbor and care for the vulnerable. The woman facing an unplanned pregnancy and the child in her womb are our neighbors and fellow human beings made in God's image. And while not every woman is in a vulnerable position when facing an unplanned pregnancy, there are many who are in circumstances that make it feel impossible to keep a pregnancy. And the child in the womb is certainly vulnerable if a woman is considering abortion. Believers must be willing to step into the lives of those facing unplanned pregnancies and offer support that will encourage choices for life.

1 Society of Family Planning, #WeCount Report, https://www.societyfp.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/WeCountReport_April2023Release.pdf

2 Rachel K. Jones and Doris W. Chiu, *Characteristics of abortion patients*, Wiley Online Library; April 11, 2023, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1363/psrh.12224>

3 https://www.societyfp.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/WeCountReport_April2023Release.pdf

4 <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/5-features-early-church-unique/>

5 <https://www.mullers.org/museum>

6 <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/history-today-george-whitefield-founds-an-orphanage/>

7 <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/ro-stand-life/>

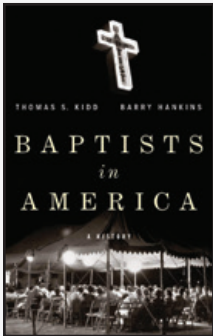
8 <https://www.philanthropyroundtable.org/magazine/less-god-less-giving/>

9 Rachel K. Jones and Doris W. Chiu, *Characteristics of abortion patients*, Wiley Online Library; April 11, 2023, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1363/psrh.12224>

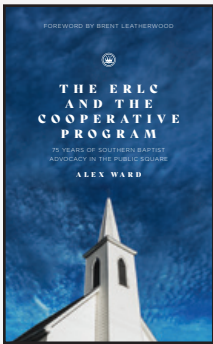
10 March of Dimes, *Population Data for United States*, <https://www.marchofdimes.org/peristats/data?reg=99&top=14&stop=127&lev=1&slev=1&obj=3>

11 Guttmacher Institute, *Characteristics of U.S. Abortion Patients in 2014 and Changes Since 2008*, <https://www.guttmacher.org/report/characteristics-us-abortion-patients-2014>

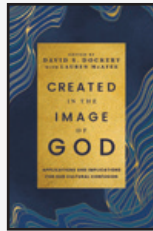
Southern Baptists and the Moral Demands of the Gospel



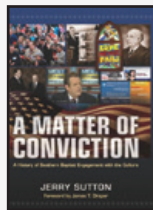
Baptists in America: A History
THOMAS S. KIDD AND BARRY HANKINS
 Oxford University Press, 2015



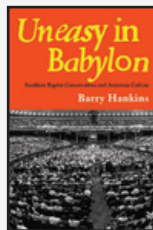
The ERLC and the Cooperative Program: 75 Years of Southern Baptist Advocacy in the Public Square
ALEX WARD
 Leland House Press, 2022



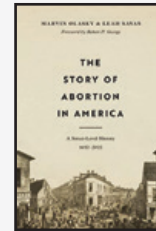
Created in the Image of God
DAVID DOCKERY AND LAUREN MCAFFEE
 Forefront Books, 2023



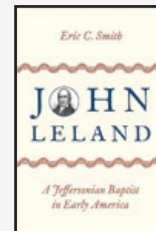
A Matter of Conviction: A History of Southern Baptist Engagement with the Culture
JERRY SUTTON AND JAMES T. DRAPER JR.
 B&H Books, 2008



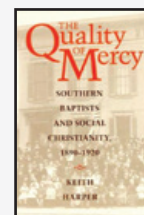
Uneasy in Babylon: Southern Baptist Conservatives and American Culture
BARRY HANKINS
 University Alabama Press, 2003



The Story of Abortion in America: A Street-Level History, 1652-2022
MARVIN OLASKY AND LEAH SAVAS
 Crossway, 2023



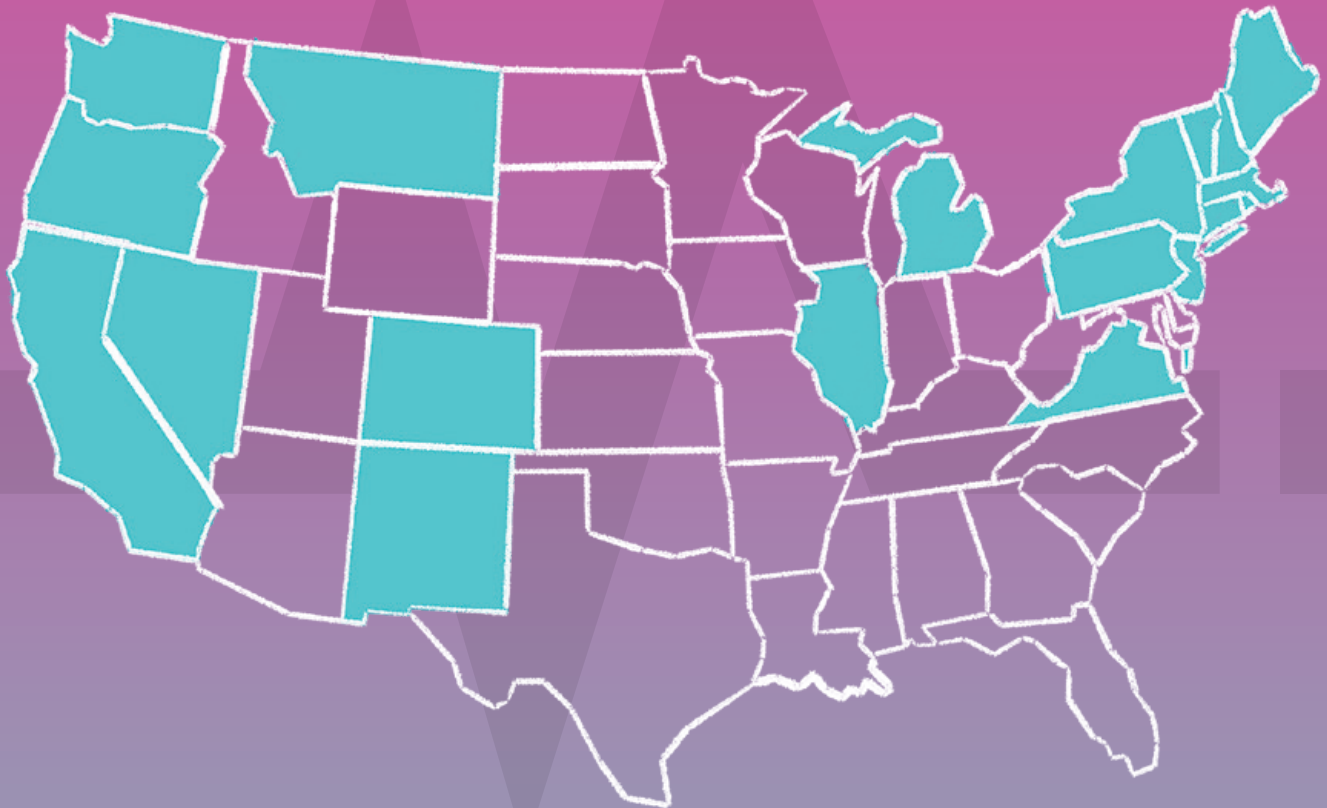
John Leland: A Jeffersonian Baptist in Early America
ERIC C. SMITH
 Oxford University Press, 2022



The Quality of Mercy: Southern Baptists and Social Christianity, 1890-1920
KEITH HARPER
 University Alabama Press, 1996



More resources available at ERLC.com



Help us place
ultrasound machines
in states like these.

Learn more at
[ERLC.com/Psalm139](https://erlc.com/Psalm139)



PSALM139
PROJECT



THE ETHICS & RELIGIOUS
LIBERTY COMMISSION
OF THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONVENTION

WASHINGTON, D.C.

505 2nd St, N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20002
202-547-8105

ONLINE

[f /erlcsbc](https://www.facebook.com/erlcsbc)
[@erlc](https://twitter.com/erlc)
[@erlcsbc](https://www.instagram.com/erlcsbc)
www.ERLC.com

NASHVILLE

901 Commerce St, Ste 550
Nashville, TN 37203
615-244-2495