

ILLUSTRATION BY ROBBY OWEN

Exiled

BY BETH SEWELL

IN A COUNTRY WHERE WARS ARE FOUGHT FOR FREEDOM, DR. CARL KELL DISCOVERED ONE BATTLE THAT HAS BEEN BREWING FOR MANY YEARS — THE BATTLEFIELD OF THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONVENTION.

Dr. Kell, a professor of communication at Western, has devoted the past twenty years, and counting, to the research of the supposed demise of the Southern Baptist Convention. It has been his project and passion, resulting in the book *In the Name of the Father: The Rhetoric of the New Southern Baptist Convention*, co-authored with Ray Camp, North Carolina State University, and published by Southern Illinois University Press. His current (in progress) work is *Exiled: Voices of the Southern Baptist Conference Holy War*.

Dr. Kell sits at his desk pushing his glasses back as he begins to explain the problems in the Southern Baptist Convention. He takes a moment to shuffle through the organized chaos of his papers, and briefly pauses.

"I sniffed it out in the beginning," Dr. Kell said with a smile. "It had all the makings of a huge, enormous fire fight that would last for a long, long time."

He explained that the controversy within the denomination began with the growing intensity of leadership within the Southern Baptist Convention. Two groups began to form and the lines were clearly drawn. Conservatives took one side and moderates the other. The conservatives' key areas of attack were on women's role in the church, homosexuals, and liberals. The moderates believed that they should have the freedom to make their own judgments in these areas as long as they stayed true to the basic framework of the Southern Baptist perspective.

The battle escalated in 2001 when more than 5,000 Southern Baptist foreign and home missionaries were asked to sign a statement that they affirm the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message, understood by some to be one of the most radical statements of faith in the denomination's history. The statement specified many beliefs on a variety of controversial issues, including women as senior pastors. Many missionaries have refused to sign the document, and many have begun fighting for their freedom.

"[The moderate Baptists] believe that they've got the freedom to interpret whatever the Bible says to them, in any way they want to," Dr. Kell said. "And that's become

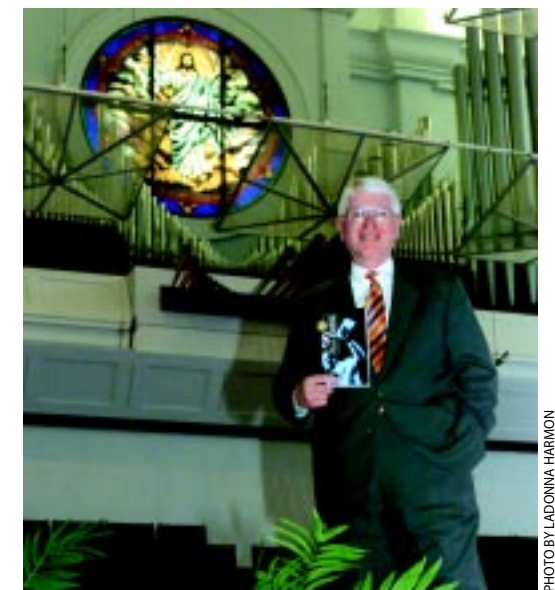


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the rallying cry of what could be labeled as a conservative/moderate crisis today." Conservatives desire a strict constructionist approach to the Bible, while moderates would interpret Scripture in light of current cultural perspectives.

Dr. Kell and co-author Dr. Raymond Camp investigated each side of the conflict, and found that there were a variety of issues that reached a lot of people, from key figures in the church to average members. (The Southern Baptist denomination is the largest non-Catholic group in America, affecting 36,000 plus churches.) As a positive result, Kell and Camp's book went on to win the Religious Communication Association's Book of the Year Award in 2000, as well as (for Dr. Kell) the 2001 James Applegate Research Award (the Commonwealth of Kentucky's top research award in communication) for its efforts to bring such a massive issue and conflict into the spotlight.

"We've been very fortunate in that the book has been successful," Dr. Kell said.

After the success of the first book, Dr. Kell realized that there were still more issues surrounding the conflicts within the Convention that he and Camp did not touch on that should have been exposed. That is when he began his second book.

The book, *Exiled: Voices of the Southern Baptist Conference Holy War*, delves further into the conflict and pinpoints the specific issue of those who are shut out of the church. Dr. Kell presents the stories of Southern Baptists who have left their denomination, letting them speak for themselves.

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"[The book] is an effort to reach out and bring in major and minor voices who felt the harsh results of the controversy," Dr. Kell said. "Many people have written eloquent essays, but there are some who have been asked and have declined — afraid to write because they live in conservative Baptist communities and are reluctant to comment on the issue."

Dr. Kell's non-fiction work with the church has led him into writing about fictional prototypes in the church. His literary imagination has enabled him to turn a new page and begin writing a murder mystery, which takes place in a church. Having switched gears completely, Dr. Kell has found the world of fiction writing harder, but only because it's a new concept.



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"I began thinking it out," Dr. Kell said, "and then, not knowing what in the sam hill I was doing, literally, I sat down, and in about six months wrote Part One of the book called *Stone Mountain*."

Dr. Kell's passion for research is evident in his extensive work with the Southern Baptist Convention. Daycross, Georgia, the mythical setting of the first chapter in *In the Name of the Father* serves as the location for *Stone Mountain*. He interviewed a number of people about the history of Southern Georgia, asking policemen how a murder case is handled, as well as other sources about life and work in a deep southern town.

"What I do is I sit down and write a chapter or two, and

then look at it and try to think about it. Then I try to pick up some magazine like *Fiction Writer*, and read some things about what I'm doing and if I am doing anything close to what's right," Dr. Kell said.

He explained that many times voices and characters just come to him, and he writes what they say. Dr. Kell has found this experience of writing fiction fun, because he can sit and read chapters out loud. He explains that he moves from one chapter to the next by reading to his wife, making corrections accordingly. Her advice is always "right on."

"I never try to plan anything or plant anything and when I try to get poetic it's just too corny, too mushy," Dr. Kell said. "So, I just write."