

# the Power of Power



# SUAS'ION

## in the Southern Baptist battle over the Bible

BY MICHAEL J. SOBIECH

Illustration by Tom Meacham



*Dr. Carl Kell*

AS THE INTERIM HEAD OF WKU'S DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION, DR. CARL KELL DOES NOT TEACH MUSIC; BUT IN TEACHING AND RESEARCHING

PERSUASIVE COMMUNICATION, HE PURSUES (AS HE DESCRIBES IT) A "MUSIC WITHOUT NOTES." AND OVER THE LAST THREE DECADES, THE TUNE TO WHICH HE HAS ESPECIALLY LISTENED IS ONE FILLED WITH THE DISCORDANT NOTES OF RELIGIOUS DIVISION.



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Kell's work as a southern rhetorical historian has led him to analyze the pulpit of the nation's largest Protestant denomination — the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). In particular, he has focused on the changes brought about during the decade-long battle for control between moderates and conservatives. Since the SBC's president can make various administrative appointments that have a broad impact on the denomination, the battle often focused on his election. And with conservative presidents consistently elected from 1980 to 1990, "the constitutional configuration of boards, committees, and administrative divisions was peopled by those who believed, generally, in a strongly conservative approach to the study and understanding of the Bible," states Kell. "And while it can be safely argued that the SBC controversy still goes on, the war has been settled."

Kell maintains that the power of persuasion is paramount in the Baptist battle over the Bible. "Along with several other communication scholars from around the country, early on I understood that this was primarily a rhetorical phenomenon — this conservative movement was going to be pushed and developed by the best preachers of major SBC churches. Baptist ministers from churches all over the country would come to the national pastors' conference and the national SBC meeting where they would hear the best sermons about the need to restore the Southern Baptist Church to its conservative roots, to let the chips fall where they may, so to speak. If individual members and churches felt like they were outside this — at least in some perspectives — 'restrictive' view about the Bible and the nature of Southern Baptist life, then they just needed to find another place to worship" said Kell.

"The pastors who came would take notes, buy books, and buy tapes because this was a place you came to get argument. Pastors went 'shopping' for argument — shopping for Scripture, shopping for sermon topics, shopping for ideas and language to develop and sustain the increasingly popular conservative message. These pastors would then go home, and, in their own way, they would replicate, duplicate, and send out the messages they had heard. In effect, this was a rhetorical expo for SBC ministers to learn and return home, armed with a powerful body of arguments."

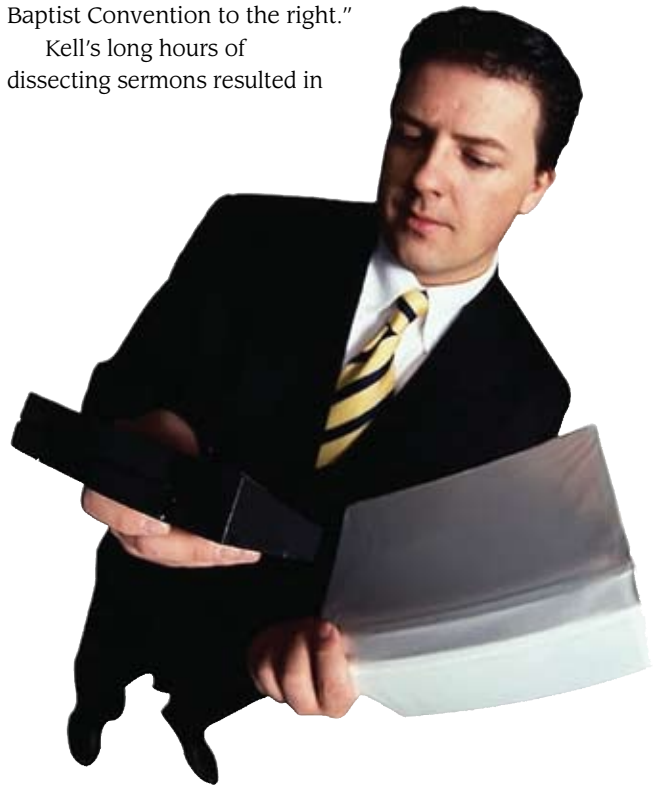
How did the pastors craft their arguments and sermons to make their case? Based on years of research and hours of analyzing sermons, Kell argues that three basic

rhetorical theories drove the division in the denomination: inerrancy, fundamentalism, and exclusion. "Inerrancy affirms that every word of the Bible is literally true. Fundamentalism affirms that there are bedrock concepts

concerning the nature of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit that are inviolate. And exclusion is a result — anyone who does not follow the Bible literally is not in line with historic Baptist theology and the nature of the New Testament Church," he explains.

"In the history of this country, we have never turned away from a great public speech event. We are always looking and listening for the skilled orator," says Kell. "And over those years the conservatives had the finest orators in Baptist life, men who heralded the scriptural and theological themes of inerrancy and fundamentalism with fire and style. Rhetorically, they were extraordinarily successful in moving the Southern Baptist Convention to the right."

Kell's long hours of dissecting sermons resulted in



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a collaborative publication with co-researcher and long-time friend Ray Camp of North Carolina State University. *In the Name of the Father: The Rhetoric of the New Southern Baptist Convention* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1999) was selected the Religious Communication Association's 2000 Book of the Year, and helped both men to be named 2000 Communication Scholars by their state communication associations. And *Name* would land another honor on Kell's desk — the distinguished 2001 James A. Applegate Award, given to Kentucky's leading scholar in the field of communication.

Having examined how a conservative leadership had persuaded the convention to their point-of-view, Kell's next book, *Exiled: Voices of the Southern Baptist Convention Holy War* (University of Tennessee Press, 2006), looked at the consequences of that decision in the lives of those who were not persuaded: "Exiled was about a people who had lost their pew." Kell's edited collection of essays by exiled Baptists garnered both a second Applegate in 2007 — making him the award's only two-time recipient — and a favorable review from moderate Southern Baptist and former President Jimmy Carter.

In *Against the Wind*, Kell's latest contribution to the history of the SBC's schism, he examines the beliefs and makeup of the moderates as a separate group, as well as peers into their future. To accomplish this, he felt the need to call on three significant scholars: Bill Leonard, William Hull, and Duke McCall. When Dr. McCall, who is in his early 90s, said that at his age he would have problems accurately remembering past events, Dr. Kell assured him, "I'm interested in your predictions, your foresight about the future trajectory of Southern Baptists." To which the initially reluctant McCall said, "Oh, I can do that." *Against the Wind: The Moderate Voice in Baptist Life* will be published in 2009 by the University of Tennessee Press.

Having finished writing *Against*, Kell had no plans for another book — until he saw an online, anonymous review of *Exiled* while at a conference in Slovenia. "I was passing

the time one night looking at online reviews of my books, and I came across one that was written by a SBC missionary in Kenya. The first paragraph was a supportive, probing, and favorable analysis of the book; the second paragraph was written to me — at least, that's the way I read it. In so many

words the woman said that she was the daughter of a man who had lost his job because of this controversy. And I felt like she was saying to me, 'I have a story to tell — and you need to tell it,'" said Kell.

"*Exiled II* is right now in the birthing stages, and I don't know what we'll find. Along with many new voices waiting to tell their story, I've just started making contacts with the sons and daughters of the thirty or so who talked to me for *Exiled*. I do know that we'll have an original poem written by a creative writing teacher who is the son of an *Exiled* contributor. And the son of the woman who wrote the first essay in *Exiled* will probably write the lead essay for *Exiled II*."

While Kell has focused on the troubles in one church, he foresees challenging days ahead for many denominations: "In truth, all non-Catholic denominations are suffering from declining numbers; and yet, at the same time, the non-denominational churches are gaining ground with each passing year. Add to that the fact that Americans are becoming more accepting of the idea that there are more ways to Heaven than that traditionally taught by the Christian church. The American church — and not just the Baptist church — has entered a new age. And when the

academy and popular culture seek answers to the shifts in American church life, I believe that the SBC work will be a part of the conversation."

But even while things change, Kell sees a predictable constant: "The organized church in the South and around the country is a world apart from the 1980s. But at the end of the day, the gifted pulpiteer, no matter the church or denomination, will always have an audience when he shouts, yells, or whispers the joy of accepting a higher power to control one's life." ■

