Fifty Years of Baylor’s Graduate Program in Religion

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The occasion for this paper is the 50th anniversary of the founding of the graduate program in religion at Baylor University. In this study I will sketch the beginning of the program, its growth, and more recent trends.

The cultural landscape has, of course, influenced the program. From the 1960s to the present we have seen major shifts in the life of the nation, in American religion, in the Baptist denomination, and at Baylor as well. I will occasionally refer to the changing context along with the internal developments in the program itself. During this half century the program has awarded 500 degrees (153 MAs and 347 PhDs).

Origins
(1954–1974)

The impetus for creating a graduate program in religion at Baylor University derived from the perceived need to prepare professors for teaching religion at denominational colleges and universities. Discussions for establishing the program began in the 1950s, and the department hired Bernard Ramm in 1954.
Through his publications Ramm had achieved a relatively high profile among Baptists. After teaching at Baylor for only four years, he moved on to American Baptist Seminary of the West in Berkeley, California. Nevertheless, he had laid a foundation for the program by organizing the curriculum into the three areas of Bible, theology, and history and by doubling the number of courses offered.

Preparing for a Graduate Program

In 1959 Eddie Dwyer (New Testament) served as the interim chairman of the Department of Religion, housed in the Tidwell Bible Building. He and faculty members Wally Christian (theology), John Davidson (psychology of religion), and James Wood (church and state; history of religions) would all contribute to graduate studies over the next two decades. In 1961 the department hired Glenn Hilburn (history of Christianity) and Bob Patterson (theology).

In 1963 Baylor recruited Ray Summers from Southern Seminary to chair the department and lead the new PhD program. He was well known for his books—especially his Essentials of New Testament Greek, a grammar, and Worthy Is the Lamb, a study of the book of Revelation. In 1966 the department added Daniel McGee (ethics), Bruce Cresson (Old Testament), and Ed Dalglish (Old Testament). All three extended the influence of the department into other areas of the university in notable ways: Dalglish in library acquisitions; Cresson in archaeology; and McGee in business and medical ethics, gerontology, and environmental studies.

Researching Graduate Programs

To inform himself and the faculty, Summers decided to explore the practices of well-established university-connected graduate programs in
religion in the United States. He reported that he visited every PhD program east of the Mississippi in the summer of 1965, asking the question, “If you were starting a new PhD program in religion, what would you do?” He took copious notes and then wrote a position paper on the proposed program. The information he gathered provided direction for several areas of program structure. The faculty met two to three hours each week during the planning stage to discuss the program.

**Program Structure: Train Broadly for Teaching**

Glenn Hilburn was planning to participate in the Baptist Jubilee Advance meeting in Atlantic City, New Jersey, in May of 1964, and Ray Summers asked him to arrange to visit Princeton as well to seek further advice on the program.\(^1\) At Princeton, Hilburn discussed the program with Horton Davies. Davies had just received a letter from a former student who was being terminated at his school because his preparation proved to be too specialized. The student had trained in church history but was not equipped to teach basic surveys of the Old Testament or New Testament. With this letter fresh on his mind, Davies’ counsel to Hilburn was that Baylor train students broadly so that they could teach multiple basic religion courses offered in many colleges. Second, he suggested that students take courses outside the department in related fields such as history and philosophy, giving candidates a greater range of knowledge, and perhaps preparing them for an additional teaching area. Hilburn recalled, “So we factored that information into the planning of our PhD program; we were bent in preparing university professors well equipped to teach and to make a living.”\(^2\)

Davies’ pragmatic counsel guided the structure of the program. Students could major in Old Testament and archaeology, New Testament, church history and world religions, or theology (systematic, historical, or ethics). In addition to the study of their major field, students took an internal minor within the Department of Religion and an external minor (in another department). To assure competence, they took six preliminary examinations during a period of two weeks—three in their major area, two in other divisions of religion, and one in their outside minor. And, of course, each PhD student wrote a dissertation in a field of interest.
Building Library Resources

The department personnel recognized the need to build stronger library holdings in order to support a doctoral program, so they secured a master list of key titles in religion from Yale University and began adding to the Baylor library collection. The windfall came when Ed Dalglish learned that the Crozier Library was going to be sold in 1970, and he arranged for Baylor to buy this treasure.3 Truckloads of volumes were delivered to the library, at a cost of about $1.25 per volume.4

Recruitment and Admissions

At first the faculty set the entrance bar too high. They created an elaborate battery of admission exams consisting of essays and more than 1,000 objective questions administered over three six-hour periods. As part of the early review of the program for accreditation, J. Phillip Hyatt, Baptist Old Testament professor at Vanderbilt Divinity School, was very encouraging to the faculty but pointed out that the entrance exam was far more demanding than that of other programs, and it was soon dropped.

When it came to recruitment and admissions, the PhD program looked first to Southern Baptist colleges and seminaries. In addition, denominations with small or no graduate programs sent their students to Baylor to earn their degrees—especially students from Churches of Christ, Holiness, Pentecostal, and Adventist denominational schools and also some from established mainline institutions, including Methodists, Presbyterians, and Roman Catholics. All were welcome. Early in the program’s history both master’s and doctoral degree programs thrived.

Launching the Program, 1966

In April 1966 the Baylor Lariat, the student publication, reported Ray Summers’ announcement: “Baylor this fall will become the only Baptist university in the world to offer the doctor of philosophy degree in religion.”5

The program opened with Summers as the chair and 10 full-time faculty members. Jack Flanders was soon hired in New Testament, and served as department chair after Summers retired in 1980. Under the leadership of president Abner McCall, the university grew in virtually every category—size, buildings, finances, and programs. McCall was deeply sympathetic to Baptist convictions, and the department had his full support. However, when
the department appealed for a reduced teaching load from four to three courses, McCall declined the request. Wally Christian recalled that the original department workload was 4/4, and he and Patterson regularly taught two seminars during the fall and spring semesters plus two freshman courses and one seminar in the summer. He said that load was “killing us.” On the other hand, Christian always expressed the highest praise for the collegiality of the department. When Hilburn became chair in 1983, he quietly reduced the graduate faculty load from 4/4 to 3/3, creating released time for graduate faculty, commenting, “I think I can just do this.”

The first graduate of the program was Wayne Denton, a gifted linguist whose dissertation analyzed the influence of Christian humanism on Latin American legal codes. Denton graduated in 1971 and taught church history at the Catholic Christian Brothers College in Memphis, Tennessee. Summers reported in 1980 that the department had opened in 1966 with 10 admissions, and that all but one of the students had completed the program.

Growth
(197–2000)

New Faculty

The Department of Religion added new faculty members from 1974 to 2000, including the following persons and their areas of teaching:

1970s:
• Jim Breckenridge (history of religions)
• Bill Pitts (history of Christianity)

1980s:
• Nayment Keathley (New Testament)
• Bill Bellinger (Old Testament)
• Rosalie Beck (history of Christianity)
• Mikeal Parsons (New Testament)
• Jim Kennedy (Old Testament)
• Barry Harvey (theology)
1990s:
• Randall O’Brien (Old Testament)
• John Jonsson (history of religions)
• Alan Culpepper (New Testament)

Because of Alan Culpepper's stature in New Testament studies, Bellinger saw his arrival as a turning point in elevating the visibility and credibility of the program. When Culpepper left in 1995 to become the founding dean of Mercer University's McAfee School of Theology, the New Testament faculty again asked, "Who is the best Baptist New Testament scholar in the country?" They persuaded Charles Talbert (New Testament) to join the faculty in 1996. Ralph Wood joined in theology and literature in 1998, and Bill Brackney (history of Christianity) was elected chair in 1999. Randall O'Brien served as chair from 2002 to 2008, at which time Bill Bellinger became chair of the department. The department instituted the position of director of graduate studies in 1983. Directors have included Daniel McGee, Bill Pitts, Bill Bellinger, Bob Patterson, and James Nogalski (current director).

Relation with Other Baylor University Graduate Programs

The department has worked closely with other university graduate programs. For many years the program enjoyed close association with the Institute for Church and State Studies. The department has also collaborated with other disciplines by cross-listing numerous courses and serving on PhD examining committees and dissertation committees in several departments, notably history, philosophy, and English. The department has provided initiative in creating new programs such as environmental studies and archaeology. The department has cooperated with other divisions of the university devoted to the study of religion, including sponsoring lectures with Truett Seminary, the Institute for the Study of Religion, and the Institute for Faith and Learning. The department also regularly hosts academic conferences and lectures on religion.

A Flourishing Program

In 1980, the year of his retirement, Ray Summers noted that the demand for the program remained strong. He reported that the program had approved about 15 new students for graduate work each fall and that the average
number in the program remained around 80, representing some 20 denominations. By 1980 the program had graduated 63 students, 53 of whom held college teaching positions.10

Conflict in the 1980s and 1990s

During the 1980s Fundamentalists took over the Southern Baptist Convention. The Baylor Department of Religion was a target of intense criticism during this era. Much controversy centered on People of the Covenant, an Old Testament textbook written by Jack Flanders and two former Furman University colleagues.11 Some undergraduates came to class armed with tape recorders to catch a heretical statement. President Herb Reynolds, a very outspoken defender of the department, engineered a charter change in 1990 to shield Baylor from the Fundamentalists, should they take over the Baptist General Convention of Texas. That did not happen, and the BGCT has remained a great friend to Baylor. The Department of Religion sought to reflect major national academic trends throughout this conflict. As such, the department continued to be able to offer a credible degree, preparing future professors, pastors, and administrators.

A Research University (2000–2015)

The Purpose of a University

The years since 2000 represent the beginning of Baylor's quest to become a research university. According to eminent Baptist historian of American Christianity Edwin Gaustad, the purpose of a university is to transmit knowledge and culture through teaching and to discover new knowledge/ideas through research.12 In his Re-examination of the Idea of a University (1992), Yale scholar Jaroslav Pelikan identified four legs on which a successful university stands, all of which require achieving high standards:
1. teaching
2. research
3. library collections
4. university press

Before 2000, Baylor qualified on only one point: it had nurtured some superb teaching. Since that time the university has sought to make strides in the other three areas.

**Teaching/Research Models at Baylor**

The tension between teaching and research is a major narrative of Baylor's recent academic history. A historical model may help to conceptualize the shift the university is still experiencing.

Abner McCall (president, 1961–1981) emphasized teaching during his 20-year tenure. Every year at the fall faculty meeting he made a point of emphasizing that Baylor does not have a "publish or perish" policy, but rather a "teach or perish" policy.

A former law professor and dean himself, he cherished excellence in teaching. Although not expected to do so, some members of the Department of Religion published extensively. In 1974 Herb Reynolds, then vice president of Baylor, asked Ray Summers to prepare a list of religion faculty publications. Summers reported that the department's publication rate matched that of the Baptist seminaries where he had taught for 26 years.¹³

Herbert Reynolds (president, 1981–1995) gave mostly verbal encouragement to research. His position was that "we do not require research, but we encourage it." Incentives for increased pay were discussed, but apparently there was little notable change in contracts based on publications. He encouraged faculty to use summer sabbaticals to promote research and publications. This was an important step forward, giving more visibility to research.
Robert Sloan (president, 1995–2005) moved to require research for tenure at Baylor. This shift was associated with the stated goal of becoming a Tier One university. A planning document, called Vision 2012, set forth this and other goals for the university. In order to pursue this goal, publication output would have to be dramatically increased. Strategies included hiring professors who were already well published and also increasing publication requirements for tenure and promotion and for remaining on the graduate faculty.

The fall-out from this change had a noticeable impact on faculty, students, and administration. For faculty, the workload shifted: The teaching load for research faculty dropped significantly, while the publication level increased noticeably. More lecturers were hired to teach general education courses. And, the administration created a two-tiered classification of professors (mainly teacher or mainly researcher)—which predictably created morale problems. For students, the university raised tuition drastically, which, of course, had a direct impact on students and their families. Finally, adoption of this new course profoundly affected Baylor administration. The actual implementation of the shift contributed to serious faculty discontent and likely contributed to the early departure of two university presidents since 2005. These examples illustrate the magnitude of the changes that have transpired at Baylor during the past decade.

**Current Trends**

*(2000–Present)*

**Hiring Graduate Faculty**

The push to become a research university has been the dominant narrative of the religion program since 2000. Currently, the graduate program influences hiring faculty in the Department of Religion. When adding new tenure-track faculty members, a central consideration is “How can the prospective colleague strengthen the graduate program?” Thus the graduate program has increasingly shaped new faculty additions. Since 2000 the
The department has added several new tenure-track faculty members, including the following persons:

- Joel Burnett (Old Testament)
- Dan Williams (theology)
- Doug Weaver (history of Christianity)
- Paul Martens (theology)
- Jonathan Tran (theology)
- James Nogalski (Old Testament)
- Lidiya Novakovic (New Testament)
- Bruce Longenecker (New Testament)
- Kelly Iverson (New Testament)
- Natalie Carnes (theology)
- Deirdre Fulton (Old Testament and archaeology)
- Beverly Gaventa (New Testament)

Currently there are 18 graduate faculty professors in religion, more than half of the department's faculty. The most important change for the department in hiring is the flexibility provided by allowing the department to hire non-Baptists, including David Whitford (history of Christianity).

**Tenure Requirements and Publication Standards for Graduate Faculty**

The department requirements for achieving tenure include publication of a book and three refereed articles or nine refereed articles. This level of publication must be achieved by the end of a candidate's first six years in the department. The rate of publication by Baylor faculty and the Department of Religion has risen dramatically under new initiatives emphasizing research. The accompanying graph shows the marked increase in religion faculty publications for selected
years. Publication statistics are meager for pre-program years, but some scholars such as A. H. Newman, Kyle M. Yates, Bernard Ramm, and Ray Summers published numerous works in their respective fields.\textsuperscript{17}

**New Opportunities for Graduate Students**

Increased emphasis on faculty publication has shifted a substantial part of the load of teaching introductory courses to graduate students, a significant change. When applying and interviewing for a job, graduate students can now report significant experience in the classroom. From preparation of the syllabus to student evaluations when they graduate, they are teachers of record for the two introductory religion courses at Baylor: “The Christian Scriptures” and “The Christian Heritage.”

With the opportunity for graduate students to teach Baylor survey courses, the need for focused instruction on teaching became apparent. In 2000, Bill Bellinger and Mikeal Parsons presented a proposal to the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion to fund a permanent teaching program for graduate students. Wabash approved the $50,000 proposal, and the pedagogy program has been in place since that time.

The program began in 2001 with Rosalie Beck as the director. She organized the program to cover many practical essentials related to university teaching, including preparing a syllabus, legal issues, profiles of 18-year-old learners, writing exams, and so forth.\textsuperscript{18} During their actual classroom teaching, experienced lecturers observe graduate students’ teaching and meet with them to discuss problems as they arise throughout each semester. The pedagogy program has significantly strengthened the teaching component of the PhD program, giving it added maturity and stability.

**Funding the Graduate Program**

Cost presents a constant problem in sustaining PhD programs. Seminars of eight students obviously do not generate the tuition of a class of 60. Administrators must be willing to finance graduate programs, and Baylor has gradually increased its financial commitment to graduate work. Donors have established funds to help pay stipends for some students, including funds in the names of Dwyer, Phillips, Sheperd, and Bowden.\textsuperscript{19}

Also, Bob Patterson negotiated with the BGCT to fund additional PhD stipends. However, the bulk of the expense has been borne by the university,
which has covered all tuition and been generous with stipend allocations. For many years the program offered a stipend for only three years. Adding a fourth year in the early 2000s was a major step forward. In 2011 the department moved to five-year stipends, made possible by admitting fewer students.

The dean of the Graduate School provides additional incentive funds, and supplements the annual stipend, based on students' test scores and GPA, letters of recommendation, and the quality of their master's program. Students work fifteen hours per week or teach to earn their stipends. These financial resources have allowed the department to compete with other leading programs for superb program candidates.20

At the time of his retirement in 2002, Glenn Hilburn's family provided a $50,000 research fund for graduate students. An additional donation brought the fund to $100,000. The interest from this fund is used to support travel for dissertation research in archives and libraries.21

Early in the program the master's degree was a popular option. However, students were generally encouraged to attend seminary for their master's degrees. President Reynolds occasionally remarked that a university's name was not established by the master's degrees it awarded, but by its PhD programs. In practice, the department has stopped admitting students for the master's degree in order to devote resources fully to PhD students.

The Graduate Student Profile

The students attracted to the graduate program have generally come from backgrounds that combine strong religious commitment and solid academic experience, themes commonly repeated in autobiographical essays submitted by all applicants. Many students express the desire to serve both the church and the academy. The number of enrolled students in the program at any time has been in the 60-70 range during the past decade.

The program has welcomed students from abroad, such as Eiko Kanamara of Japan and Robert Wattimury of Indonesia, who returned to their home countries to teach. The program has also been attentive to American diversity. The first African-American graduate was Dan McGee's MA student Cleophus LaRue, who went on to teach homiletics at Princeton Theological Seminary. Hispanic graduate Javier Elizondo serves as executive vice president and provost of Baptist University of the Americas. Numerous women have graduated from the program, a notable shift in the graduate student
profile from the beginning of the program that was all male in 1966. Rosalie Beck was not only the first female graduate of the program, but was also the first woman hired by the department (1984). The Department of Religion supports women in ministry and in the academy. The faculty now includes Asian and African-American members, and the current group of graduate students includes men and women of African-American, Asian, Caucasian, and Hispanic descent. In short, reflecting national trends, the department welcomes national, ethnic, and gender diversity.

Applications to the program range from 70 to 90 each year. Until recently the program admitted 10 to 12 new students each year, and now only eight. Consequently, the competition for admission has increased. Adding a preview weekend in February has allowed both the program personnel and prospective students to evaluate each other before making final decisions.

Reflecting the increased emphasis on publishing in the academy, students now begin to build their CVs by making presentations at academic conferences and publishing in academic journals while doing course work. Paul Martens made note of these trends in the first Initiations in 2006-2007. In that year students reported 29 conference presentations and 16 publications. By 2014-2015, the number had risen to 89 conference presentations and 87 publications. Budgets in both the Graduate School and the Department of Religion support student participation in regional and national academic conferences. Moreover, a majority of students now publish their dissertations. They are keenly aware of the value of publications for their careers.

The most obvious change in student religious identity is the shift from predominantly Baptist culture to predominantly Evangelical culture. A
variety of factors have gone into this shift. Formerly the program attracted many students from the six Southern Baptist seminaries. Now almost none come from these institutions. The media perception of Baptists is increasingly negative, and the name is often dropped from individual churches. Moreover, the growing trend to affirm spirituality while rejecting institutional religion is working against established denominations. Because Baylor markets itself as both Christian and academic, the program attracts students from various evangelical and non-denominational backgrounds.

Baylor PhD students help one another in countless ways. The Graduate Theological Fellowship promotes numerous social and academic events. But informal conversations and friendships formed have had an even more powerful impact. The sense of community is one of the most important features of the program.

Program Evaluations

Faculty

Faculty serve actively in the academic guild, including the American Academy of Religion, the Society of Biblical Literature, and additional specialized academic organizations—where they give presentations, moderate sessions, and accept leadership positions as officers.

Academic Journals at Baylor

The department has been closely associated with production of academic journals including the following:

- *Journal of Church and State*, begun by James Wood in 1959
- *Texas Baptist History*, 1981ff, edited for its first 20 years by Bill Pitts
- *Perspectives in Religious Studies*, 1974ff, edited since 2002 by Mikeal Parsons
Baptist Studies

Baylor University is one of the most viable places to earn a PhD in Baptist studies. Faculty are active in the National Association of Baptist Professors of Religion and in the Baptist History and Heritage Society. Despite change in the American religious landscape, James Nogalski found that 39 percent of Baylor graduate students in 2015 were Baptist. Doug Weaver is currently leading Baptist studies at Baylor.

Program Ranking

A decade ago the program's ranking moved from somewhere in the top 30s to the top 20s, depending on the ranking agency and its criteria. In 2015 Graduate Dean Larry Lyon reported that Academic Analytics, which focuses on books published, ranked Baylor's graduate religion program number six in the nation—the highest national ranking of any Baylor graduate program.23

Placement of Graduates

The program has been fortunate in its placement record. Most graduates are gainfully employed in service vocations. Graduates have pursued a variety of vocational paths, including the following examples:

- Many have entered university administration, including Royce Money, who served as president of Abilene Christian University for 19 years, and John Vassar, provost at Louisiana State University in Shreveport.
- Many serve as pastors, including some in leading churches of the nation such as Amy Butler at Riverside Church in New York City.
- Some have become denominational leaders, such as Pam Durso who leads Baptist Women in Ministry.
- Some, like Derek Hogan and Rob Krapohl, have served as librarians.
- Others have worked as chaplains, journalists, counselors, or missionaries, and some have served in organizations focused on Christian ethics.
- Most of the graduates are professors who have devoted much of their time and energy to teaching undergraduate or seminary students.
Conclusion

There is much to celebrate in the half century of the Baylor Graduate Program in Religion—thanks to the dedicated work of both faculty and students and the support of the university and its administration. The program has responded to a variety of challenges in American culture, to denominational crises, and to university demands. Looking toward the future, the program has never been stronger. Academic and religious structures will doubtless continue to change, and the program will need to respond accordingly. Baylor, established by Baptists in 1845, established its graduate program in religion in 1966. This program has contributed much to American religious life for 50 years by offering advanced study of religion, and is in an excellent position to continue to do so in the years ahead. BH&HS

Notes

1 I wish to acknowledge the work of research assistants Andrew and Tia Kim, Susan Moudry, and Scott Prather in the preparation of this paper. Andrew Kim located numerous key sources and pictures and prepared statistical summaries and charts. I also want to acknowledge the support of the graduate program in religion in making this research possible.

2 The Department of Religion holds printed copies of the theses and dissertations.

3 Ray Summers, "Oral Memoirs," interview by Daniel B. McGee, 28 August 1980, transcript, vol. 2 (Institute for Oral History, Baylor University) 15:494-95. Summers noted that deans and presidents, following the lead of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, preferred to hire professors with the PhD rather than those holding the ThD degree.

4 Ibid., interview 16: 506-16. Thanks to the foresight of the Baylor Institute for Oral History, vital aspects of the story have been preserved through faculty interviews.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.


9 Hilburn, oral interview by Pitts.


12 Ibid., interview 16: 1 and 11: 20.

13 Hilburn, in conversation with Pitts, 1983.

14 Summers, "Oral Memoirs," vol. 2, interview 15: 491. There were health problems in the family of one student; this student also eventually finished the degree.

15 Ibid., interview 15: 493-95.

17 Edwin Gaustad, lecture, Department of History, Baylor University, Spring 1977.
18 Summers, "Oral Memoirs," interview 16: 526-528. This is an impressive report, considering the fact that seminaries offered sabbaticals to faculty every seven years, providing substantial time for research.
19 From 1960 to 1995, a 35-year span, tuition for 10 hours rose from $1,330 to $4,040, which, controlled for inflation, was a 3.2 percent increase per year. From 1995 to 2005, a 10-year span, tuition rose from $4,040 to $9,702, which, controlled for inflation, was a 9.2 percent increase per year, or almost triple that of the previous 35-year period. Since 2005 this pace has slowed somewhat as tuition has increased from $9,702 to $15,150, which, controlled for inflation, is a 4.6 percent increase per year. (Andrew Kim prepared these calculations.)
20 Limited space does not permit discussion of individual faculty members whose work is critical to the success of the program. Consult the religion graduate program for profiles.
23 A full description appears in Dr. Beck’s “Teaching Colloquy” syllabus, Department of Religion, 2013.
24 The full names of these long-established stipends are the C. D. and V. D. Shepperd Memorial Fund, Mauritta C. Bowden Religion Graduate Scholarship Fund, Eddie L. and Velma Rich Dwyer Endowed Scholarship Fund, and Loyd F. Phillips Trust. Additional funds have also been established for lectures, research, and other departmental needs.
25 The annual university support for religion graduate student tuition exceeded $1.5 million in 2016.
26 By 2016 more than $30,000 had been distributed for travel and research from interest generated by the Glenn O. and Martel B. Hilburn Endowed Fund.
27 Initiations is an annual publication of the Department of Religion. Past and present editions can be found at www.baylor.edu/religion/index.php?id=64501#publications.
28 Larry Lyon, e-mail to Bill Pitts, 27 August 2015. Book publications, of course, are only one standard of measurement of these programs.