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Watterson, Gene L. (1969)

Pastors of First Baptist Shelby

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State's Baptist meeting will be worth watching

The North Carolina Baptist Convention opens today in Asheville under the leadership of its president, the Rev. Gene Watterson of Shelby's First Baptist Church.

Observers are predicting a fight among the state's Baptists such as has been seen over the past few years among Baptists nationally with moderates and conservatives vying for leadership.

But, this is more than merely infighting among Christians with basically the same philosophies. It is political and the results to some extent shape the path that politicians follow in appealing to mainstream voters. The politicians watch closely the way the Baptists vote at their meetings nationally. They will be watching closely what happens in Asheville this week.

Nationally, the Baptists have given the politicians something to look at other than the way the voters might be feeling. They have shown the politicians how power can be used, and not in the best of ways.

One of the matters on this week's agenda for the North Carolina Baptist Convention meeting involves the appointment of committees that oversee Baptist institutions in the state.

Presently, the appointments are made with the cooperation of the Convention's 100-member general board. The conservatives, who now occupy leadership positions nationally, want to give the president of the North Carolina Convention the power to make such appointments.

That could hit home in Cleveland County. One of those Baptist institutions is Gardner-Webb College. There is potential that conservatives could take over the direction of the school, and questions might be raised over how much academic freedom would be allowed. Nationally, conservative leaders have shown a disturbing lack of interest in compromise and acceptance of differing views.

Watterson will step down as president of the Convention this week. Moderates and conservatives have

their slates of candidates to replace him. Both sides will have difficulty in choosing a leader such as him.

Watterson is no liberal, nor is he a conservative fundamentalist. He is a moderate in his philosophy and in his manner.

In a recent interview with this newspaper, Watterson said: "I'm not a fundamentalist. I am one of many Baptists through the years who have seen the fundamentalists become a rigid, self-aggrandizing group whose attitude is we're right and, if you don't agree with us, you're wrong. That's very dangerous."

As president of the Convention, Watterson has led a relatively peaceful coexistence between moderates and conservatives.

He himself said: "I think the unity of spirit and ideal was the main thrust that I sought for the Convention."

The next few days will tell a lot about whether there can remain unity among the Baptists in this state.

Will the Baptists be united in their Christian missions to serve God and God's people, or will their considerable energy be sapped by bloody battles for power and control?

Asked in the interview what he sees in the future for the North Carolina Baptist Convention, Watterson said: "I really think that North Carolina is not going to fall victim to any fringe group, regardless of how it is packaged. I think the people of North Carolina will spurn a spurious savior who is coming to rescue it. We have a long history of freedom and independence in North Carolina that will serve us well, I believe, in this election year."

Watterson has served his congregation of fellow Baptists well. He has also served his community and the concept of freedom within religion. He has been a healer when wounds could so easily be opened. He has proven to be the best kind of leader — one who serves those who would follow rather than one who would dictate how followers should serve him.