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News Analysis

Baptist State Conventions Act On  
Education, Doctrine, Vietnam

By Jim Newton  
For The Baptist Press

Three major issues dominated sessions of 29 Baptist state conventions during late October and November, with one or more of these three issues cropping up in 20 out of the 29 conventions:

--The increasing difficulty of adequate financial support for Baptist colleges, and the related aspect of federal aid to Baptist institutions.

--Doctrinal matters, including policies on accepting messengers from churches that practice "alien immersion," and convention actions reaffirming the Baptist Faith and Message Statement adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention in 1963 and 1925.

--The war in Vietnam, with nearly a dozen Baptist state conventions adopting resolutions supporting to some extent the policies of President Richard M. Nixon.

With almost amazing repetition, the 29 Baptist state conventions dealt with one or more of these issues. To read reports from the meetings was almost like hearing a broken record repeating the same things over and over.

These weren't the only issues, though. Each convention had its own concerns, and each was uniquely different. There were other similarities, however.

About eight conventions dealt with major constitutional changes or restructure study reports. A half dozen took differing actions on sex education in public schools, Another half-dozen condemned businesses that remain open on Sunday, and still another half-dozen opposed legislation or elections concerning liquor by the drink.

The 1969 Baptist state conventions could be described generally as "conservative," although no one adjective or label could appropriately apply to all.

More conventions passed resolutions on the Vietnam war than any other single issue. Eleven different state conventions adopted resolutions that most often commended President Richard Nixon for his efforts to find a just and honorable peace to the war, and assured him of Baptist prayers.

Two conventions--Hawaii and North Carolina--refused to approve resolutions supporting the established procedures for conscientious objectors, while Texas Baptists approved its Christian Life Commission report which pledged "to respect the conscientiousness of those who feel they should participate in war as well as those whose Christian conviction is that they should not participate."

Problems relating to financing Baptist higher education programs continued, as they have during the past 10 years, to dominate sessions of a half-dozen state conventions.

During 1969, however, a resurgence of concern about Baptist doctrinal beliefs broke out at the state convention level, with at least 10 different conventions taking some action related to the current Southern Baptist doctrinal debate.

The Arkansas and California conventions both appointed committees to study convention policies on accepting as messengers to the annual meeting persons from churches that practice "alien immersion"--that is, accepting as church members persons who have been baptized (immersed) by non-Baptist churches. Last year, Arkansas Baptists refused to seat messengers from four churches that practice "alien immersion."

In New Mexico, the convention defeated a constitution amendment offered from the floor asking that no church be recognized by the convention that practices alien immersion. Last year, the convention approved a committee study which recommended that no constitutional requirements be made regarding the issue.

Texas Baptists approved a report from a committee appointed to study the issue last year, recommending that no change be made in the current constitution which does not prohibit or approve of alien immersion.

The doctrinal issue, however, goes much deeper than the question of "alien immersion." At least a half-dozen state conventions reflected concern in their resolutions about "theological liberals" in the denomination who question traditional Baptist doctrines.

Four of these conventions--Florida, Indiana, Mississippi and Colorado--adopted resolutions reaffirming support of the 1963 Southern Baptist "Statement of Baptist Faith and Message."

Florida Baptists went a step further by asking the six Southern Baptist seminaries to reject liberalism, and Mississippi Baptists declared they shared the views expressed by Southern Baptist Convention President W. A. Criswell of Dallas who earlier had urged persons who do not believe the 1963 statement to leave the denomination.

Criswell spoke at several of the conventions, and during press conferences repeated and even strengthened his earlier remarks.

Criswell also had some strong words concerning Baptist financial support of their schools, saying that Baptist denial of federal aid to the schools coupled with a corresponding refusal to support them financially was "ecclesiastical, denominational hypocrisy" because "we say and do not." He predicted that gradually, Baptists would have to "turn our schools lose."

Actions by some of the conventions may lend credibility to Criswell's predictions. Two state conventions voted to sell their hospitals, and two other state conventions debated strongly whether to cut lose their schools, only to reject the proposals by a slim vote.

The closest vote came in Florida, when the state convention meeting in Miami voted by only five votes--382 to 377--to keep Stetson University's \$310,000 allocation in their 1970 budget. Later the convention voted to appoint a committee to study relationships with Stetson and another Baptist college owned and operated by the Palm-Lake Baptist Association, West Palm Beach.

In Virginia, a committee appointed to study the denomination's total program had recommended that financial support of its seven schools be phased out by 1973; but the messengers rejected the report by a 51 vote margin in preference for a substitute which called for keeping the present relationship between the state body and the seven schools.

Hawaii Baptists also voted down a committee recommendation that it phase out financial support for its academy by 1973.

North Carolina Baptists approved a vast two-year study of problems confronting its seven colleges and universities that recommended additional state Baptist financial support when possible, and maintaining and strengthening all seven schools. The report approved of some forms of government aid under the "services rendered" concept.

Federal aid to Baptist schools was hotly debated in three states, each taking different positions.

Texas Baptists, who own and operate 10 schools as the largest convention, rejected by vote of 1,203 to 728 a proposal which would have allowed state Baptist institutions to secure long-term, low-interest government loans for building construction.

The Georgia Baptist Convention, by a 20 vote margin (386-366) referred for a year's committee study a motion that would have asked Mercer University, Macon, Ga., to rescind its vote applying for three federal construction grants, and overwhelmingly approved a motion asking Mercer to declare a moratorium on federal funds until the report is made next year.

Mississippi Baptists refused to "instruct" trustees of their four schools on the federal aid question, but they did overwhelmingly vote to "urge" the trustees not to accept direct federal aid and engage only in programs that would provide aid to students.

During the debate on the issue, several persons questioned whether the convention could financially afford expensive higher education programs. Later, a committee was authorized to study and redefine the overall educational purpose of the Mississippi convention.

Two conventions voted to sell or dissolve ties with four of their hospitals, and the high financial cost of operating such institutions was partly behind the decision in both cases.

By only eight votes, 133-125, the Arizona convention authorized the sale of its three hospitals in Phoenix, Scottsdale, and Yuma, Ariz., and land owned in Tucson for a hospital site. Forty per cent of the funds received from the sale will go to support Grand Canyon College in Phoenix, which is in the midst of a financial crisis.

The Louisiana Baptist Convention, by a vote of 257 to 160, approved severing ties with Baton Rouge General Hospital, releasing control to an interdenominational board of trustees that will be free to seek financial support, including federal aid, not available under Baptist ownership.

The financial squeeze of operating expensive educational and medical institutions is hurting in some states. Three conventions--Arizona, Kentucky and Maryland--voted to reduce their budgets this year (although the Maryland reduction was caused mostly by the exodus of churches in the New York area to form a new convention).

The Southern Baptist Convention may be in for harder times in the future, since several of the state conventions cut the amount or percentage going to the SBC Cooperative Program.

The Mississippi Baptist Convention, for example, cut the SBC allocation from 33 percent to 30 percent of their budget of \$4½ million. The convention increased its total budget only \$50,000. All contributions over the \$4½ million goal however, will go to SBC causes.

The Kansas Convention, in perhaps the hottest financial waters of all with an indebtedness of \$1.6 million, took steps toward overcoming their problems by approving a \$500,000 fund campaign, hearing plans for about \$500,000 in additional aid from other state conventions, and approving a budget and restructure of the state staff to provide more funds to the sinking fund of the church bond program that caused the problem.

Restructure studies, or major constitutional overhauls, were approved or authorized by eight state conventions, each slightly different. Perhaps most comprehensive were the studies in Virginia and South Carolina. Several other states grappled with the basis of representation of either associations or churches at the annual convention.

Sex education in public schools concerned seven conventions, with five of the seven favoring some form of sex education.

Oklahoma and Northern Plains Baptist Conventions strongly opposed sex education in public schools, while Baptists in Virginia, District of Columbia, Kentucky and Texas supported, though not too strongly, such programs. Indiana Baptists adopted the same resolution passed by the Southern Baptist Convention in New Orleans which supported such programs in the home and church, but said nothing about public school programs.

A half-dozen other conventions passed resolutions or took actions opposing the sale of liquor by the drink or increased use of alcohol, and trends toward commercialization with major businesses open on Sunday--the Lord's Day.

A few conventions dealt with the problems of poverty, race relations and Black Power, with Virginia, Kentucky and North Carolina passing especially strong statements. Oregon-Washington Baptists elected a Negro woman as vice president, and Utah-Idaho elected its first Negro Executive Board member.

Dealing with these issues--financing Baptist schools and its federal aid controversy, Baptist doctrinal differences, the war in Vietnam, restructure, sex education, liquor by the drink and Sunday closing of businesses--the majority of the 29 Baptist state conventions ended the decade of the 1960's.

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NBC's Chancellor To Speak  
At Mission 70 Conference

11/25/69

ATLANTA (BP)--National Broadcasting Co., newsman John Chancellor will review the 1960's and speculate on the 1970's before some 4,500 students and young adults congregating here for Mission 70, Dec. 28-31.

The Southern Baptist conference on world missions and church-related vocations will also feature Negro Baptist Pastor Bill Lawson of Houston, and Evangelism Professor Kenneth Chafin of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville.

The Program, however, will be heavy on drama, music and dialogue, rather than on speakers, conference leaders have said.

On the news staff of NBC since 1950, Chancellor has covered every major election and has served at news bureaus in Vienna, London, Moscow, Brussels and Berlin. He is also a former director of the Voice of America, and has been host on NBC-TV's "Today" show.

Following the 1964 election, he was assigned to the NBC Washington news bureau as chief White House correspondent.

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