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Reaction Roundup

Baptist Editorials Agree:
It Was a Good Convention

By Jim Newton

NASHVILLE (BP)--Chalk up an editorial first for the Baptist state papers; for once they were agreed in their evaluation of an annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention.

The 1972 session in Philadelphia was described almost unanimously by nearly two dozen Baptist state papers as "a good convention"--one with a minimum of divisive debate and a maximum of peace and harmony.

And most of them further agreed the convention steered down the middle of the road theologically, veering neither to the left or right, while at the same time dealing with some vexing issues from a Christian perspective.

The decisive action of the convention to defeat a motion to withdraw the 12-volume Broadman Bible Commentary drew support from almost all of the editorials, and virtually no criticism. The effect of the motion, observed the South Carolina Baptist Courier, "was to unite the messengers in a manner Southern Baptists have not enjoyed in almost 20 years."

In the seven years this writer has been studying and evaluating editorial reaction to the annual sessions of the convention, there appeared to be more unanimity and agreement among the editors in their interpretations than ever. Their editorial evaluations tended to reflect the harmony shown at the Philadelphia meeting.

The convention "won't go down as one of the most sensational meetings in SBC history," wrote the editor of the Christian Index in Georgia, "but it will be remembered as one of the most consistently constructive SBC sessions in many a day."

Strongest words of commendation for the convention came from the Kentucky Western Recorder which opined that the 1972 session would be recorded "as one of the most significant conventions in our history."

Most of the editorials commented on the spirit and attitudes of the messengers. "Give Southern Baptists a good conduct mark for their behavior in Philadelphia," wrote the Ohio Baptist Messenger. Numerous others agreed.

It was one of the best spirited conventions in the past five years, added the Maryland Baptist. "Instead of 'feudin', fussin', and fightin',' Southern Baptists debated the issues in the best of Christian attitudes," the Maryland paper noted.

The Indiana Baptist praised the absence of the "political rally atmosphere" of the last four years, saying: "cat-calls and name-calling were not heard like those which dominated the 1970 Denver convention for example."

An editorial in the Rocky Mountain Baptist of Colorado observed that the messengers "were either less concerned, more apathetic, more pleased than not with the way things are going, or just didn't care, than those attending prior conventions."

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A half-dozen editorials agreed that the action on the Broadman Bible Commentary should reaffirm Southern Baptists' middle-of-the-road theological position, and should not be interpreted as a shift to either left or right.

"The Philadelphia Convention brought Southern Baptists back to a broad, center position which a diverse body must hold if it is to function with any degree of harmony and purpose," noted the North Carolina Biblical Recorder.

Both the Baptist Record of Mississippi and the Baptist Messenger of Oklahoma pointed out that the action on the Broadman Bible Commentary should not be interpreted as a shift from theological conservatism to theological liberalism. Both editorials were entitled, "Southern Baptists Are Still Conservative."

The Mississippi Baptist Record argued that the commentary action was not the most important action of the convention, was not a turn toward liberalism, and was not an endorsement of the commentary. Instead it was simply a rejection of a move to recall the commentary after it has been completed, the Baptist Record noted.

The Georgia Christian Index called the commentary action "easily the most rewarding vote of the entire convention." Added the Kentucky Western Recorder: "Baptists who returned from Denver in 1970 and St. Louis in 1971 heavy hearted and discouraged left Philadelphia in 1972 with happy hearts and renewed confidence for the future of the witness of Baptists in today's world."

Why was the commentary motion, offered by Gwin Turner of Los Angeles, defeated? The editorials gave several reasons.

The Indiana Baptist cited four, none theological: (1) few Baptists have read the commentary and it will have little effect on the denomination's life; (2) the motion was too big and was an over-exaggeration to claim 12 volumes were out of harmony with Baptist views; (3) the messengers were tired of dealing with the issue after three years; and (4) the motion was promoted in advance by an organized group.

The Oklahoma Baptist Messenger agreed with the last two reasons, but added a third: the convention was telling the Sunday School Board they expected them to deal with the issue, not the convention.

Several editorials credited President Carl Bates' address to the convention with setting the tone for the convention that led to the defeat of the commentary motion. Bates dealt with the commentary issue in his presidential address "courageously and eloquently," noted the Maryland Baptist. The result was that the motion, predicted to be the big bang of the convention, "ended up more like a whimper," said the Maryland editorial.

The Baptist state papers also played a role in the defeat of the motion by printing the motion in advance, editorializing against it, and giving the messengers information in advance on which they could make their decisions with analysis and reflection, rather than in the heat of debate, pointed out the Louisiana Baptist Message.

On another convention action, a four-to-one vote rejecting restructure a proposal to abolish the SBC Stewardship Commission and assign its work to the Executive Committee, most editorials agreed the convention wanted to see the entire restructure proposals for all agencies, rather than dealing with the report piecemeal.

The Colorado editorial said there was objection to the committee's procedure, and that the committee exercised poor public relations. Colorado, Louisiana and Maryland editorials proposed that the committee be expanded to become a convention committee, rather than a committee of the SBC Executive Committee.

The Capital Baptist of the District of Columbia, most vocal opponent of the restructure proposals, went a step further. It proposed that the restructure committee be dissolved, and its assignment be transferred to a new convention committee.

Pointing out that such committees don't win popularity contests, the (Texas) Baptist Standard, which editorially supported the restructure proposals, expressed doubt of future recommendations' success because of possible attacks by agencies bent on survival. "The committee definitely needs to be more explicit as to the reasons for its recommendations. It needs better dialogue before making them final," the Texas paper said.

At least three editorials speculated that the Stewardship proposal was defeated because the messengers feared centralization of power in the SBC Executive Committee.

Concerning another recommendation adopted to require a two-thirds vote for the convention to consider immediately any motion from the floor dealing with internal work of SBC agencies, the Indiana Baptist, which opposed the motion, said it will be interesting to watch the frustrations which come next year when the bylaw takes effect.

"No one can justly claim to have been gagged or mistreated by those entrusted with guiding the convention deliberations," pointed out the Kentucky paper. Such charges were made by several papers last year following a bylaw interpretation which led to the adoption of the new bylaw 17.

At least a dozen editorials were unanimous in their praise of Carl Bates as president of the convention.

The Illinois Baptist wrote an open letter to Bates, entitled "Dear Carl," praising him for his leadership. "You helped to swing our convention back to its major purpose," the editorial said.

Several papers called Bates' presidential address "a masterpiece," and cited its role of bringing unity to the convention. The Virginia Religious Herald called it the most effective the editor recalled hearing.

"That he was interrupted eight times with applause proves beyond question that the messengers were with him," added the Maryland Baptist.

The Indiana Baptist credited Bates with shifting the bitterness of the Denver convention (1970) to the peaceful spirit of Philadelphia (1972), and said Bates would be remembered as one of the greatest presidents of the convention.

A dozen editorials also commended the election of Owen Cooper, a layman from Yazoo City, Miss., as the new convention president.

"Mr. Cooper is another moderate voice who has shown quiet courage and unique creativity in his own state and at almost every level of Southern Baptist leadership," observed the Georgia paper. "He is another who won't lead Baptist off on any wild tangents of ultra-extremism in any direction."

Described as "the denominational dynamo from Mississippi" by the South Carolina editorial, Cooper's style was contrasted to that of Bates by the Baptist New Mexican. Cooper is a "driving, creative, innovative person" who is used to issuing orders to a vast industrial complex, the New Meico paper noted.

Several editors said that 13 years was too long to wait for election of a layman as president, but the wait was worth it with Cooper's selection.

Nomination of a woman for president, and a black for vice president drew little comment in the editorials. "Apparently Southern Baptists aren't ready for a woman president," said the Maryland paper. The Indiana paper predicted, however, that "before too many years pass, Southern Baptists will have their first woman president."

A constitution amendment introduced to limit the term of SBC president to one year and select a president-elect as vice president drew offsetting comments. The Colorado paper liked the idea, but the South Carolina editorial said it would be "unwise and potentially divisive to have a future president waiting in the wings."

There was also mild disagreement among the editorials on the significance of resolutions adopted by the convention.

An editorial in the Oklahoma paper called the resolutions relevant and said they dealt with today's issues, such as Vietnam, alcohol and drug problems, welfare reform, tax reform, anti-semitism, political involvement, television and movie pornography, and government support of religion.

The Ohio and New Mexico editorials agreed, pointing out the 36 resolutions from the floor set a new record. "These are definite indications of the directions being advanced by a new generation," the New Mexico paper said.

In contrast, the Virginia Religious Herald wrote that the biggest negative of the convention was "the excessive number of relatively trivial resolutions." Many of them are expressions of personal concern and do not merit the time and effort of the messengers, the editorial observed.

"It did appear that some had more sound than substance," agreed the Baptist and Reflector of Tennessee. Added the Indiana Baptist: "It is questionable whether the time and anguish involved in presenting, discussing, amending and voting on resolutions are worth the value achieved."

The Alabama Baptist, whose editor Hudson Baggett was on the committee that met for 20 hours to consider resolutions, said that hopefully the SBC Executive Committee will consider recommending some changes of procedure in handling resolutions.

Philadelphia was both praised and mildly chided as a host city. Several editorials appreciated the cordial reception of the people in the "city of brotherly love."

But several others lamented the lack of news coverage, the long distance between hotels and the auditorium, the inadequate sound system of the auditorium, and the high prices of food.

There was, however, a noted lack of criticism and grumbling in most of the editorials commenting on the convention. They seemed to agree: it was a good convention.

"It just could be that the convention is coming of age, and that it will exert an increasingly stable influence upon a society which needs Jesus Christ so desperately, and apart from whom there is no answer," summed up the Tennessee Baptist and Reflector.

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Baptist Standard Converts To
Four-Day Week for Summer

6/22/72

DALLAS (BP)--The Baptist Standard, state news magazine for Texas Baptists, has converted to the four-day work week--for the summer only.

Editor John J. Hurt, who says the Standard experimented with the four-day week last summer, allows employees to stagger the extra day off, June-September, while the publication's office remains open five days a week.

Two other Southern Baptist agencies--The SBC Radio and Television Commission in Fort Worth and the Brotherhood Commission in Memphis---are experimenting with the four-day work week. The two agencies possibly will continue the policy the year around.

A normal work week for the Standard staff is 37 1/2 hours. During the four-day week, Hurt allows a 34-hour week.

Hurt says the Baptist Standard will make the four-day week a summertime advantage only because, "our subscription turnover is lighter in the summer and we run mostly 16-page issues as opposed to our normal 24 pages."

He doesn't approve of the four-day schedule in the winter because he believes "it damages efficiency when key people are out the day you may need them." Hurt rejects for himself, however, the four-day work week. While his staff members are off, he will be at the office working the full schedule. "We editors don't have time for four-day weeks," he said.

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