



## **BAPTIST PRESS**

News Service of the Southern Baptist Convention

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79-67

Church-Associational  
Boundaries Ambiguous

By James Lee Young

**NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP)**--How can one autonomous body be joined with another autonomous body without one of the two giving up autonomy? Where are the boundaries between associational authority and local church authority?

Those two questions were posed by Southern Baptist historian Walter B. Shurden in the joint annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Historical Commission and Historical Society.

Local Baptists claim, and rightly so, because of their congregational form of church government "to be independent and autonomous," said Shurden, church history professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Ky. Baptist associations make the same claim to self-government. And each recognizes the other's right to make the claim, he added.

To illustrate the difficulty in determining the bounds of authority pertaining to the association and the local church, Shurden quoted C. E. Colton's remarks as chairman of the credentials committee of Dallas (Texas) Baptist Association in 1975 when two charismatic churches were excluded from the association.

Colton made the motion to exclude the two churches, then said: "I would like for you to understand that the action that we are suggesting here today is not designed in any sense of the word to presume to exercise authority over anybody's church. We believe in the autonomy of the local church, and we would not want to be a part of any program that would violate the autonomy of any local church. We have been accused of doing this, but this is not the case... But let us also remember that the Dallas Baptist Association is also an autonomous body, and that it also has the right to do what it feels it is led of the Lord. It has some right to fellowship."

Then Shurden posed more questions: "Was Colton giving voice to ecclesiastical mumbo-jumbo? Are these simultaneous claims actually in conflict?"

Actually, the search for answers to the problem of church-association relationships in Baptist history "is an old one," Shurden said. "Tensions in congregational-associational relationships go back to the beginning of associational life. We should not, therefore, throw up our hands in despair as though we are confronting a problem which comes out of our time."

Instead, Shurden maintains, the issue of associational-church relations will not go away and is built into the fabric of Baptist ecclesiology. "Unless Baptists become something other than Baptists, the problem will never disappear," he said, citing several recent incidences of exclusion of churches from associations.

He cited the exclusion of charismatic churches, beginning in 1975, in Texas, Ohio, Louisiana and California, from associational fellowship.

And in 1977, a Kentucky church was excluded from an association for ordaining a woman. The associational messengers voted 96-64 to exclude Beech Fork Church in Gravel Switch, Ky., which had ordained Suzanne Coyle.

Subsequent letters to the Western Recorder, weekly newspaper of Kentucky Southern Baptists, "revealed how diverse and contradictory is the thinking among Kentucky Baptists regarding this kind of associational action," Shurden noted. And the Kentucky State Convention, determining ordination was a local church prerogative, refused to rule on ordination of women.

More direct associational action has been exerted on the issue of baptism, Shurden said, than on either the charismatic movement or ordination of women. Since the 1960s, associations in North Carolina, Kentucky, Arkansas and South Carolina have excluded churches for baptismal practices considered unorthodox. Some churches were excluded for accepting alien immersion, for receiving as members persons who had been immersed as believers in other denominations.

Last year, a survey mailed to 825 directors of associational missions showed that of 300 respondents, 83 associations had experienced conflicts over doctrine or polity from 1973-78. "Seventeen associations indicated they had actually withdrawn fellowship from churches during that period," Shurden noted. "The search for boundaries in church-associational relationships is obviously a live issue," he observed.

In stressing "independency" and "autonomy," Shurden continued, "Baptists never meant their churches were independent of God, of Christ, of the leadership of the Holy Spirit, or of the counsel of other Christians and churches. Emphasis on independency never excluded interdependency.

"By independency, Baptists meant they could order the lives of their churches according to the will of God as they understood it. No agency of the state, no pope, bishop or civil ruler, and no other ecclesiastical organization could impose a decision on the church without the church's permission."

But theory and practice of associational authority among early Baptists "often contradicted the claims concerning local church independence" in such areas of determining membership, disciplining members and selecting local church officers, Shurden said. "Theory and practice were not always the same, . . . and the history of associational polity is freighted with ambiguity."

In the search for boundaries in church-associational relationships, Shurden advised, "we ought to carefully and clearly reaffirm the centrality of the local congregation within Southern Baptist life. We may do this on biblical, theological and historical grounds."

He cautioned that he was not advocating "ecclesiastical lone-rangerism. . . In fact, I would suggest that application of the concept of the universal church to denominational structures alone serves only to support a denominational chauvinism which we need badly to rethink."

Shurden also called for reaffirming of the "right of associations to regulate their own membership. The argument that associations are merely for fellowship and that they have no grounds for excluding churches is a specious one."

Also, associations "should not allow themselves to be used to determine the legitimacy of a church's membership in state conventions or in the Southern Baptist Convention," Shurden said.

Some would like "to predicate a church's membership in the state convention upon satisfactory associational membership," a process that "would place unfortunate authority within regional associations. . . I suggest we leave the associations free to hammer out their faith for themselves, and that we learn to live with diversity inherent in such an approach," Shurden concluded.

The State Convention:  
A Baptist Headquarters?

NASHVILLE, TENN. (BP)--Although the Baptist state convention has become a powerful and important entity in Southern Baptist life, "there is no clear cut theological statement" concerning the convention, nor is there a rationale for its existence, according to a professor at Carson-Newman College, Jefferson City, Tenn.

"The founders of the state convention adopted a system that worked to accomplish their goals. The rapid growth which followed obscured the lack of an adequate theological foundation," said Paul Brewer, chairman of the humanities department at the Baptist school, in an address to the joint annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Historical Commission and Historical Society.

But Brewer cautioned that even though the state convention "was not derived from biblical precept, it does not have to be justified as such. It developed to solve problems which transcended the local community" and as a "limited instrument for the achievement of certain missionary and benevolent goals."

In other words, Brewer noted, a lack of biblical, theological or even rational considerations concerning the state convention "does not mean the organization is evil." He quoted Barrington White in "Authority: A Baptist View:" "All structures are neutral; they may become instruments--unwilling and unknowing--in the hands of the Spirit of God or they may be willingly cooperating with His purposes. Sometimes the structures can be shot through with corruption. Authority can be wielded by ecclesiastics in a heartless way as a bludgeon for opening the way to fulfillment of their own desires."

Brewer then noted, "Because structures can be misused they must continually be evaluated...from the viewpoint of a theological understanding of the nature of church and an awareness of historical development. Without this there results a loss of identity and a tunnel vision, and the norm becomes the narrow view of what is not present or the outspoken witness of a few self-proclaimed experts."

In defining the state convention, Brewer said that one "clear conclusion" is that it "is an organization which Baptists relate to. A few attend its annual meeting, some seek to control it for their own purposes, and others know its name. It continues to grow with its developing organizational machinery, stature and importance. It also continues to add to the confusion about its identity."

But the confusion about the state convention and its relationship to the local churches has a "long history," Brewer noted. He then outlined state convention beginnings in the days of frontier revival in the "revolutionary era." From the revival era and the resultant growth in several areas, denominational activity began a shift from the local congregation to the convention.

Baptists were already participating in associations, but they saw the need for even greater cooperation for particularly doing foreign missions. And in 1821, the South Carolina Convention was formed with Richard Furman elected president and a constitution adopted. Purposes were defined as missions, education, service to the destitute, and Sunday School promotion. Churches that contributed to the work were to have a voice in funds distribution.

At first, the new convention was a "'coalition of associations,'" with membership coming from associations "along with representatives from other religious bodies of the Baptist faith," Brewer said.

Some Baptists realized that organizing of a state convention would lead inevitably to centralization of authority, Brewer noted, and they were faced with a problem in "developing a suitable polity to deal with the conflict between the authority of the local congregations and that of state boards and agencies."

Today, Brewer said, "it's difficult to think of any area of activity in Baptist life not affected by convention decision." He then cautioned, "when Baptists look at their conventions, the norm for evaluation cannot be the business model. No secular model is adequate to help in understanding the body of Christ.

"In any bureaucratic structure there is a distinct psychological climate," he said. "Members are expected to be loyal to the organization and defer to the leaders. Through indirect pressures the organization inculcates its own values, ideals, attitudes and behavior patterns.

"All the pressures exerted are designed to enhance and further the organization itself. Any freedom tends to be submerged by the centralized authority, and the decision making from above tends to erode responsibility and integrity."

However, a criterion that justifies tighter control at the state level is that "important matters which once could have been handled locally can now be dealt with more efficiently at the state level. But the tight organization of the state convention runs the risk of allowing its leaders to assume an ever-increasing control of goings-on in the association and at the local level.

"Thus, the local church can take on the image of an outpost which exists primarily to get the convention's work done at the local level," Brewer observed.

Baptists must face facts, Brewer continued: "For many years Baptists have emphasized the freedom of the individual in all matters of faith and practice. They have also insisted on the autonomy of the local church and the freedom of the individual congregation to govern its own affairs apart from coercion by a convention. At the same time, they have developed an impressive organizational structure which reflects the social structures found in the business world.

"Despite assurances to the contrary, state conventions exercise a significant degree of control over the affairs of the local church...", he said. "In uniting to achieve common goals through a state convention, Baptists have yielded a great deal of authority to state leaders...What has happened is the development of a high degree of centralization but based on a greatly decentralized theology."

Baptists also must "admit there is no 'Baptist polity' as such," the professor challenged. "In apostolic times, church polity apparently grew as needs arose in the church. Since the needs differed, so probably did the churches...Now we can have the freedom to adapt our denominational machinery without wondering whether we have violated a nonexistent biblical pattern...Through the ages Baptists have decided many things in church polity at the practical level. This...does not violate their commitment to the New Testament," Brewer told the historians.

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Aging, Mental Health  
Considered By Panel

By Carol Franklin

Baptist Press  
4/25/79

WASHINGTON (BP)--Too often our national mental health care systems have no room for the elderly, Rosalynn Carter told participants in a two-day meeting on mental health and aging.

"The harsh reality about our present system of mental health care is that for too many professionals and in too many programs, the elderly 'do not exist,'" Mrs. Carter said. "I shall never forget what one woman wrote me while I was working with the President's Commission on Mental Health... 'one reaches the age where one is considered not to exist.'"

Mrs. Carter noted the complex roots of mental health problems in old age--financial worries, unhappiness over the loss of social status, and grief over the death of loved ones. "All can lead to depression, even suicide," she said.

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U. S. Rep. Claude Pepper, D-Fla., chairman of the House Select Committee on Aging, sponsor of the conference, told the audience that 25 percent of all suicides in America are by people over 65. Only 11 percent of the population is over 65, he said.

"In the United States, you have one strike against you if you are old, two strikes against you if you are mentally ill, and three strikes if you are both old and mentally ill," Pepper said.

Mrs. Carter, as well as other speakers, urged increased research into the problems of aging and mental health. Robert Butler, director of the National Institute on Aging, said, "Research is not frivolous. It is the ultimate service and the ultimate cost containment."

Herbert Pardes, director of the National Institute of Mental Health, pointed out that less than one percent of the nation's 27,000 psychiatrists are in geriatric practice. "There is a pervasive sense of pessimism in the medical profession about working with older patients. This must be dealt with in the training period for doctors, nurses, social workers, and related fields."

Wilbur Mills, former congressman and former chairman of the House Committee on Ways and Means, spoke on the special problems of the elderly and the use of alcohol and other drugs. Looking fit and trim after his bout with alcoholism five years ago, Mills told the crowd, "I'm a very, very grateful alcoholic."

"Sober, I can deal with reality," Mills said. "I used to live for the fantasy world created by the bottle... Two things made me an alcoholic--I drank booze and I mixed drinks with highly addictive drugs I was taking for a back ailment."

Mills acknowledged that he was lucky because friends cared about him and doctors did not pamper him. "Also, I was employed even though I was 65," Mills said. "Most people at 65 are retired--and retirement is awfully hard. But studies have shown that there is a lower alcoholism rate where there is planned recreation for the elderly. The idle mind rusts."

Participants met several times in task forces to develop specific legislative proposals to improve the present system of care for the elderly with mental illnesses.

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Baptists and Lutherans  
Begin Dialogue Series

By Tom Dorris

Baptist Press  
4/25/79

ST. LOUIS, Mo. (BP)--If Baptists and Lutherans who assembled in St. Louis for their first session of national theological dialogue had wanted a theme song, it might have been "Getting to Know You."

As they introduced themselves to each other during the first session of their three-day meeting at Concordia (Lutheran) Seminary, most noted that they hadn't had much contact with representatives of the other tradition in the past.

The North American Baptist Fellowship and the Lutheran Council in the U. S. A. are co-sponsors of the three-year dialogue series, which will include representatives of four Lutheran and five Baptist denominations.

Participants suggested that Billy Graham is probably the one who has most shaped the Lutheran image of Baptist theology and attitudes, while Baptists noted they viewed Lutherans through their seminary studies about Martin Luther and his theological successors.

They heard and discussed three pairs of papers--on the U. S. experience of each group and on areas of agreement and disagreement.

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Glenn Igleheart, director of interfaith witness department at the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board, and Lawrence Folkemer, systematic theology professor at Lutheran Theological Seminary, Gettysburg, Pa., a Lutheran Church in America school, co-chaired the sessions.

In his presentation, Igleheart suggested three issues for Baptists facing the future. Speaking of "identity," he asked, "how much uniformity is required, and how much diversity is allowed? ... Another identity issue is the business model... which threatens to turn the church into a corporation, and stresses the organization more than the organism."

He also touched on Baptists' "impact... on American and world life in the future" and "their relationship with other Baptists, other Christians and persons of other faiths," as major items for their future agenda.

C. George Fry, historical theology associate professor at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Ind., a Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod school, spoke of "two great crises" facing Lutherans in 1979--"recovery of their theological identity" and "crisis of vitality... If faith is at a low ebb, so is Lutheran life, at least as measured in growth," he suggested.

In their discussion of agreements and disagreements, participants sometimes pointed to differences within their traditions as big or bigger than those between them. They also noted that not all contemporary members of each tradition affirm, or are even aware of, various aspects of some traditions as they have existed over the centuries.

These observations referred to such issues as scriptural interpretation and church government.

The group decided to concentrate at its November meeting at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Ky., on faith and experience and those acts which Baptists call ordinances and Lutherans refer to as sacraments. It decided to omit for the time being detailed consideration of the baptism of infants and very young children, an issue popularly perceived as among the greatest differences between the two traditions.

In the course of their sessions, the participants suggested that each tradition could learn much from certain aspects of the other. Lutherans, for example, noted the Baptist emphasis on evangelism and missions; Baptists pointed to Lutheran theological giants over the years.

Baptist denominations which will send participants to the three-year dialogue are the Southern Baptist Convention, American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A., North American Baptist Conference, Seventh Day Baptist General Conference, and the Progressive National Baptist Convention. Lutheran bodies are the American Lutheran Church, Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches, Lutheran Church in America, and Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.

Southern Baptists besides Igleheart on the dialogue team are George Beasley-Murray, professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Ky., and James Tull, professor at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Wake Forest, N. C.

Staff for the dialogue are Charles Wills, associate secretary, Baptist World Alliance, Washington, D. C., and Paul Opsahly, director, Division of Theological Studies, Lutheran Council in the U.S.A., New York, N. Y.

Prayer Urged for Liberia  
After Riots Leave 36 Dead

MONROVIA, Liberia (BP)--Southern Baptist missionaries have resumed their work in the wake of rioting that left 36 dead and 375 injured in Liberia's capital, Monrovia.

But Bradley D. Brown, chairman of the missionary organization in Liberia, has written to urge prayer on behalf of the nation. "National leadership needs it, and we all do," Brown wrote John E. Mills, the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board's secretary for West Africa.

The riots, which occurred at the start of the Easter weekend, were reported to have resulted from government approval for increases in the price of rice, the staple food of most Liberians. Widespread looting of food stores occurred, and the New York Times reported that damage to government buildings, stores, and other property would run into the tens of millions of dollars.

President William Tolbert called on troops from neighboring Guinea, with which Liberia has a mutual defense treaty, to help bring the riot situation under control. By Easter morning, he had eased curfew regulations and urged his people to attend church.

During the height of the rioting, the United States embassy in Monrovia advised all Americans in the area to remain off the streets. Twenty-four Southern Baptist missionaries live in Monrovia or in the immediate area. No violence was reported outside the capital.

"With things seeming now to be under control, we see no immediate need for concern and do not feel the situation will disrupt our work," Mills said in Richmond after receiving Brown's letter. Mills said that the kinds of tensions and dissatisfactions which result from this kind of situation often work to make the average person more responsive to the gospel.

He did observe, however, that Liberians' frustrations over the continuing impact of inflation coupled with wage ceilings indicate there may be "long-felt results" from the present situation.

The Liberia Baptist Missionary and Education Convention, Inc., headed by President Tolbert, a Baptist minister, now has more than 180 churches with a membership of some 30,000. Mills said the convention, a strong force in Liberian society, will celebrate its centennial in April, 1980.

Liberia was founded in 1822 by Negro freedmen from America and considers itself the oldest independent country in Africa wholly governed by persons of African lineage. Liberia's constitution was written in Providence Baptist Church in Monrovia, considered a national shrine today.

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Secretaries Should  
Face Job Problems

By Linda Lawson

Baptist Press  
4/25/79

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP)--A Nashville television newswoman who recently became a Christian urged participants in the National Conference for Church Secretaries to use their faith in dealing with job problems.

Speaking at a luncheon during the four-day conference sponsored by the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board's church administration department, Ruth Ann Leach told the more than 500 registrants that "secretaries have problems on the job, even in churches."

Ms. Leach, who began her broadcasting career as a secretary, said, "If you have specific problems, don't complain but do something about them. Face the reality of what the problem is," she said, adding that most on-the-job problems are people problems.

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Whether the issue is the secretary at the next desk or the church member who calls daily in need of someone to listen, she urged the conferees to deal with their problems by relating lovingly with people and through prayer.

"If you don't know how to pray, you're in a great place to learn," she said.

Ms. Leach, who became a Christian less than one year ago during her husband's successful bout with cancer, said Christian secretaries should respect the authority of the people who supervise them.

"It's not easy to understand how your boss is looking at the world," said Ms. Leach, a member of Nashville's First Presbyterian Church.

She urged the secretaries to be sensitive to their daily on-the-job opportunities to practice their faith. "Too often we pray for opportunities. Maybe we need to be praying for the ability to take advantage of the opportunities we have," she said.

An avowed feminist and a proponent of the Equal Rights Amendment, Ms. Leach said one of the hardest things she has had to learn since becoming a Christian is that God loves all people equally, including those on both sides of women's issues.

However, she criticized actions taken by some women in the name of liberation. "If a woman finds out after she has married and had children that she is not experiencing fulfillment, how much right does she have to pursue fulfillment at the expense of those children?" she asked.

On the other side, she said that because of her stand on ERA a group of Christian women had tried to have her fired from her job at Nashville's WTVF-TV, where she is a reporter and co-anchors the weekend evening news.

"If you are not busy loving your neighbor as yourself, you are headed backward in your character and in your job," she said. "The toughest part is being nice to those you don't agree with."

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SBC Childcare Set  
For South Main Church

Baptist Press  
4/25/79

HOUSTON, Texas (BP)--Pre-school childcare will be provided at South Main Baptist Church for out-of-town messengers only during the general sessions of the Southern Baptist Convention, June 12-14, in Houston.

At a cost of \$5 per child per session payable at the time of registration, children born in 1973 or later may be registered for care while parents attend the morning, afternoon and evening sessions of the SBC on Tuesday, June 12; the morning and evening sessions, Wednesday, June 13; and the morning, afternoon and evening sessions, Thursday, June 14. There is no afternoon session on June 13.

The church is at 4100 South Main St., Houston, Texas 77002. Telephone is 713-529-4167.

Children will be cared for under the following guidelines: Childcare facilities will open one hour before opening of each session and close 30 minutes after the session; an additional \$5 will be charged for children picked up late; no food service will be available; children will be registered by parents and picked up by parents and will be checked in by a registered nurse at the beginning of each session; in case of emergency, the SBC First Aid Committee will be contacted and parents notified.

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