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News Service of the Southern Baptist Convention

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79-69

WRAPUP

Diverse, Sometimes Chaotic,  
Polity Works: Say Historians

By James Lee Young

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP)--Who has authority over whom?

Some speakers declared that Southern Baptists have drifted increasingly toward centralization of power. Others, particularly former Southern Baptist Convention President James L. Sullivan, insists they have not.

Rather, Sullivan insists, the denominational agencies have become more "concentrated," with their bases in such cities as Nashville where several agencies have their offices.

But he told members of the Southern Baptist Historical Commission and Historical Society in their joint annual meeting that "centralized" is not to be confused with "concentrated." The former, he said, has to do with organization, while the latter has to do with geography.

The evident confusion over Baptist polity and what it is was pointed up in an address by Paul Brewer, chairman of the humanities department and a philosophy professor from Carson-Newman College, Jefferson City, Tenn. His topic was "The State Convention--A Baptist Headquarters?"

Even though the Baptist state convention has become a powerful and important factor in Southern Baptist life, Brewer said, "there is no clear cut theological statement" concerning conventions; neither is there an existing rationale for the convention's existence.

In fact, Brewer told the group, Baptists must "admit there is no 'Baptist polity' as such." He said that 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 non-existent biblical pattern... Through the ages Baptists have decided many things in church polity at the practical level."

However, he noted, "This... does not violate their commitment to the New Testament."

Confusion over the role of the state convention and its use, right or wrong, is evident also in the role of the association in Baptist life from the early days, according to the historians.

From the early days, both the state convention and association had among their primary purposes to do missions work, education, service to the destitute and, often, Sunday School promotion, as in the case of the South Carolina Convention, organized in 1821. Churches contributing to that work had a voice in funds distribution, which is determined by messengers today, on recommendation from executive committees or boards regarding annual budgets, with exceptions.

Autonomy versus centralized authority rose as an issue repeatedly in the addresses, with the discussions on local associations citing the ambiguity in the history of associational polity.

Theory and practice of associational authority among early Baptists often contradicted claims concerning local church independence, in the areas of determining membership, disciplining members and selecting local church officers.

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Walter B. Shurden, church history professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Ky., and Historical Commission chairman, said that "tensions in congregational-associational relationships go back to the beginnings of associational life. We should not, therefore, throw up our hands as though we are confronting a problem which comes out of our time."

More direct associational action, Shurden said, has been exerted on the issue of baptism, than either the charismatic movement or ordination of women ministers, all three issues of which he gave examples in recent Baptist history.

Shurden called for the reaffirming of the "right of associations to regulate their own membership" but cautioned that 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."

Foy D. Valentine, executive director of the SBC Christian Life Commission, pointed out that the independent nature of Southern Baptists and the various facets of Baptist polity forbid authoritative social pronouncements and actions. But he said pronouncements and resolutions are worthwhile in "the hope they will convey moral authority, that they will be heard sympathetically and received willingly by Baptist people."

Larry Baker, professor of Christian ethics at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, cited a number of factors which make Baptists vulnerable to para-church groups. They include the pragmatic concern to do missions, evangelism and educational work, coupled with lack of authority to impose programming in churches, the historically-rooted fear of connectional church government and a certain amount of "ignorance and naivete" about not only Southern Baptist history, heritage and programs but about the para-church groups which "siphon time, energy, money and people from Southern Baptist causes."

Another speaker, Dale Moody, professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Ky., said the question of biblical authority is at the center of controversies and discussion in Southern Baptist life today.

"The real question is biblical authority versus Baptist traditions that have no biblical basis," Moody said. "Let me have my Greek New Testament and let creeping creedalism be halted in the interest of faith and freedom."

Moody declared, as did other speakers, that certain confessionals and other influences from Baptist history had contributed to what he viewed as inconsistencies between Southern Baptist polity and the New Testament. For one, "concern for the primacy of the local church has, at times, excluded belief in the church as the one body of Christ composed of all true believers in all congregations in all generations," he said.

Moody said that a movement since 1961 has threatened the cooperative but non-creedal polity of the Southern Baptist Convention: "Southern Baptist polity has been forced into a new situation in which the convention is being used in a creedal way." He cited the formation of and charges of liberalism in the SBC by the dissident Baptist Faith and Message Fellowship.

And, Moody noted, "Southern Baptists seem to be uncertain where local autonomy ends and associational fellowship begins."

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Shurden Re-Elected  
By Historical Commission

Baptist Press  
4/27/79

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP)--The Southern Baptist Historical Commission re-elected Walter B. Shurden of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Ky., as chairman, and adopted a \$287,000 budget for 1979-80 during its annual meeting in Nashville, Tenn.

The Southern Baptist Historical Society, meeting jointly with the commission, elected W. Morgan Patterson of Golden Gate Theological Seminary, Mill Valley, Calif., as president.

In other action, the commission presented its annual Norman W. Cox Award for historical writing to Claude Howe Jr., professor of church history at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, and approved plans to publish Vol. IV of the "Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists," in cooperation with Broadman Press, possibly by 1982.

The commission also authorized appointment of a steering committee to plan for a consultation on church membership, in cooperation with the Sunday School Board's Church Training department and other agencies to deal creatively with membership losses.

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1979 Pastors' Conference  
Has No Budget, Lindsay Says

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (BP)--Because of a lack of funds, none of the program personnel will receive payment for their appearance at the 1979 Southern Baptist Pastors' Conference, June 10-11, at the Houston Coliseum, according to Homer G. Lindsay Jr., conference president.

"The only expenses that are being incurred are the cost of printing the program and the rental of the coliseum, which will be defrayed by an offering at the conference," said Lindsay in response to a recent recommendation by conference vice president Cecil Chambers that the conference make full financial disclosure.

Lindsay said he has asked John Hatch, conference secretary-treasurer, to release a full financial statement following the meeting, which precedes the annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention, June 12-14, at the Summit and the Astrodome.

"It's good for the pastors to know this kind of information," said Lindsay, pastor of First Baptist Church, Jacksonville, Fla.

Chambers, pastor of Centerville Baptist Church, Anderson, S.C., had also said he would recommend to the conference that future programs be selected by a committee made up of the president and two pastors appointed by the vice president and the secretary-treasurer.

"That would be fine with me," said Lindsay, "if that's what the pastors want. I wouldn't have minded doing it that way this year. I just did it the way it's always been done before." Traditionally, the president has taken sole responsibility for the program.

Lindsay said the conference in Atlanta in 1978, when Bailey Smith of Del City, Okla., was president, "experienced such financial cost, due to the meeting place and the cost of image magnification screens, that the Pastors' Conference of 1979 began the year with no money." He said the 1979 conference will not use the image magnification system used regularly during SBC sessions.

"The conference in Houston will not pay honoraria or travel expense to any of the speakers since all of them are Southern Baptist pastors, evangelists or denominational workers," Lindsay said.

"None of the music personalities will receive any compensation either, including Bill and Gloria Gaither, the only two non-Southern Baptists, who will come to Houston and sing for an hour on Monday afternoon (June 11) at their own expense," he continued.

He said the choir and orchestra of First Baptist Church, Jacksonville, Fla., and the choirs of First Baptist Church, Orlando, Fla., will be flown to Houston at the expense of those churches and that evangelist James Robison, one of the speakers, will furnish an organ, piano and sound system free of charge.

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Arizona Executive Board  
Names Johnson Candidate

Baptist Press  
4/27/79

PHOENIX, Ariz. (BP)--Arizona Baptists will meet May 8 in their second special called convention in less than a year to vote on Jack Johnson, pastor of First Baptist Church, Ponca City, Okla., since 1976, as their next executive director-treasurer.

Johnson, 44, was elected by the Arizona Southern Baptist Convention's executive board April 20, but must be confirmed by elected messengers from Arizona Southern Baptist churches. If elected, he will succeed Roy F. Sutton, who retired effective Dec. 31, 1978.

Messengers rejected the original selection of Mark Short, now church program consultant for the Louisiana Baptist Convention, July 7, 1978, when Short received 11 votes less than the two-thirds majority he needed. He was then associate pastor and administrator at Houston's South Main Baptist Church.

Johnson has been a pastor in California for 19 years. He was president of the Southern Baptist General Convention of California and chairman of the board of trustees for California Baptist College.

He is a graduate of Oklahoma Baptist University, Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary and the California Graduate School of Theology.

The convention will be held at First Southern Baptist Church, Phoenix.

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Baptist PR Practitioners  
Support Equal Employment

FORT WORTH, Texas (BP)--More than 100 Baptist public relations practitioners went on record supporting equal employment opportunities for men and women within the Southern Baptist Convention at the silver anniversary meeting of the Baptist Public Relations Association.

One hundred ten members from 18 states and the District of Columbia passed the resolution in response to last year's Consultation on Women in Church Related Vocations. Twenty-six of the 65 new members joining BPRA this year are women.

Meeting for its 25th anniversary in the city where it was founded, members of the association also pledged themselves to help maintain the basic freedoms of religion and press contained in the First Amendment.

The association, which sponsors competition in 28 writing, photography, public relations and advertising categories, established a new award for excellence in photography and named it the Fon H. Scofield Jr. Award. Scofield, who died last year, was a 22-year member of BPRA and for nearly 30 years a photographer and audio-visuals expert for the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board.

He was involved in producing 49 motion pictures, 96 filmstrips, 86 mixed media programs, 200 slide sets and 28 recordings related to foreign missions. His widow, Johnni Johnson Scofield, presented the first award of a plaque and \$50 to Everett Hullum of the SBC Home Mission Board for his picture "New Citizen, July 4, 1978."

"Fon would say this is a very good example of inter-agency cooperation," Mrs. Scofield said.

Stan Hastey, associate director of information services for the Baptist Joint Committee in Washington, was elected president. Other officers are Jennifer Bryon, communications specialist in the bookstore division of the Baptist Sunday School Board, program vice president; Ken Day, director of the department of promotion, Home Mission Board, membership vice president; Don Hepburn, director of public relations for the Southern Baptist General Convention of California, treasurer; Connie Davis, assistant editor of Crusader magazine, Brotherhood Commission, secretary; Rick Styles, vice president for university relations at Hardin-Simmons University, awards chairman; and Tim Nicholas, associate editor, Mississippi Baptist Record, newsletter editor.

The 1980 meeting will be in Nashville, Tenn., in conjunction with the national Religious Communications Conference. Reservations were made at the Fort Worth Hilton Inn, site of the 1979 meeting, for the golden anniversary in 2004.