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The Southern Baptist Convention and the Issue of Interdenominational Relationships

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The question of Southern Baptist involvement in ecumenical organizations arose in the twentieth century with the development of church federations and parachurch organizations. Southern Baptists then faced decisions related to membership in, and participation with, movements that included other non-Catholic denominations.

The larger issue of Southern Baptist involvement with other denominations in evangelistic endeavors arose earlier. In the late nineteenth century, Southern Baptists eagerly joined with other denominations in revival prayer meetings and cooperated in the evangelistic campaigns of D. L. Moody.

Concern for the unity of the Body of Christ has characterized Southern Baptists from the organization of the SBC to the present. At the same time, the Convention has avoided entanglements that would compromise doctrine, restrict the freedom and independence of the Convention, or violate basic issues of Baptist conviction.

The first major stirrings of ecumenical interest came in the aftermath of Reconstruction as the nation healed its wounds and sought a new basis of unity. Unity among the churches was a part of this desire, and Southern Baptists did not resist the call to seek the unity of the denominations on a scriptural basis. In 1890 the Southern Baptist Convention stated: "We respectfully propose to the general bodies of our brethren of other denominations to select representative scholars, who shall seek to determine just what is the teaching of the Bible on the leading points of doctrine and polity between the denominations."¹

A standing committee representing several bodies and denominations met over the next few years, and eventually produced a three-point basis of proposed union.² The Southern Baptist Convention was not impressed. When in 1894 the group, by then known as the General Convention of Disciples, presented their report and overture to the SBC, a committee was assigned by the Convention to compose a response. The SBC committee expressed its frustration that the General Convention of Disciples had not attended to the biblical issues as the SBC had requested, but was instead satisfied with generalities. In their report, the SBC committee stated a principle that has guided Southern Baptists to this day: *The only genuine basis of true Christian unity is a unity on the teachings of the Bible as commonly accepted and commonly understood.* The Convention has thus resisted any compromise of its cherished doctrines, or any basis of union that would deny their importance.

The issue was of sufficient interest to the Convention that a paper was presented to the 1900 session of the SBC by I. T. Tichenor. At this point the issue ceased to interest the Convention for some time.

The issue of cooperative evangelism arose again in 1909 when the Home Mission Board asked the Convention to advise concerning the formation of a Home Missions Council, based in New York City, that was intended to produce a common home missions strategy for all Protestant denominations. The Convention responded by adopting a statement

addressed to the mission board. The Convention advised its Home Mission Board that it was pleased by the courtesy and fraternity that it experienced with the other denominational boards. "We desire also that our Board shall have ample liberty for conference and for such concert of action with other Home Mission Boards, so far as it may deem proper for the maintenance of kindly relations and good understanding as to the vast and unspeakably important work of Home evangelization."³

But the Convention also expressed a warning against any doctrinal compromise. "These doctrines we hold only as we find them in the Scriptures, and they constitute, very largely, the reason for our denominational existence, and we can not [*sic.*] look with approval upon any alliances on the part of our Board that could possibly imperil these doctrines."⁴

Further, the Convention advised the HMB to avoid any agreement that would assign regional responsibility to respective denominational bodies, thus precluding the SBC from missions in those areas in which it was not assigned.

The SBC thus advised its board to avoid compromise, but it did not instruct the HMB to avoid any alliance that would not entail such compromises. As W. W. Barnes reflected, "The Convention thus declared that, on the one hand, neither itself nor any of its agencies shall be bound by agreement to any policies or methods, but that the way is left open to friendly and fraternal conference as occasion may arise; that, on the other hand, the churches cannot be bound by the Convention to cooperate or not co-operate [*sic.*] with any interdenominational organizations, since the churches themselves are independent bodies."⁵

The challenge of international missions has required inter-denominational contact and communication from the beginning of the modern missionary movement. The Foreign Mission Board (now International Mission Board) was represented in meetings of the Foreign Missions Conference of North America from 1893 to 1919. The FMB joined the Conference in 1938 as international tensions reached a fever pitch. It withdrew from the Conference in 1950 when the National Council of Churches was formed and the Conference merged with that body.

The SBC also participated in meetings of a committee desiring a world conference of all Christian communions on issues of faith and order. From 1912 to 1918 a report on progress was made to the Convention.

In 1914 the SBC adopted a "Pronouncement on Christian Union and Denominational Efficiency" that set forth Southern Baptist conditions for any Christian union. The Convention again avoided any doctrinal compromise, and resisted calls for the denominations to overlook doctrinal differences. The SBC rejected the call for organic union but did not deny vast areas of doctrinal agreement: "We have declared ourselves on those matters which enter into the question of outward or organic Christian union. *We have not dwelt upon the truths and doctrines in which there is substantial agreement among evangelical Christians. We rejoice that the measure of agreement is already so great. We regret that it is not great enough to remove our separateness from brethren in Christ who bear other names.*"⁶

President J. B. Gambrell addressed the 1919 Southern Baptist Convention with his concerns in the aftermath of World War I. The War Department had forced all non-Catholic chaplains to work without denominational identification, while allowing Roman Catholics freedom to their own convictions. President Gambrell expressed the outrage of the Convention: "The result [of the war policy] was, that in the most critical hour in the worlds history, the hour of the greatest evangelistic opportunity, the hour when the men in the camps most needed the strength of God in their hearts, the great evangelical denominations of America, which had made the moral fiber of the Nation, were forbidden as such to minister to their people."⁷

In 1925 the Southern Baptist Convention adopted both the Cooperative Program and the *Baptist Faith & Message*. In this historic Baptist confession, the SBC included an article on "Co-operation" that included this statement: "*Christian unity in the New Testament sense is spiritual harmony and voluntary co-operation for common ends by various Christian denominations, when the end to be attained is itself justified, and when such co-operation involves no violation of conscience or compromise of loyalty to Christ and his Word as revealed in the New Testament.*"⁸

By the onset of World War II, new urgencies called for a restatement of the Conventions stance on union. The World Conference on Faith and Order was held at Oxford in England in 1937. Dr. John R. Sampey attended as the Conventions official representative. Sampey addressed the Conference in a plenary session, and stated that "I have the distinct impression that in the findings of the Conference, though we affirm more than once our belief in the Saviourhood of the Lord Jesus, and his sole

mediatorship, yet time and time again the church and the sacraments are thrust between the individual soul and the Saviour, as in some sense necessary to his salvation.”⁹

In 1938 the SBC adopted a “Report on Interdenominational Relations” that included a bold and clear statement on Southern Baptist understandings of other evangelical denominations: “. . . [W]e profoundly rejoice in our spiritual union with all who love the Lord Jesus in sincerity and truth. We hold them as brothers in the saving grace of Christ, and heirs with us of life and immortality. We love their fellowship, and maintain that the spiritual union of all believers is now and ever will be a blessed reality. This spiritual union does not depend on organizations, or forms, or ritual. It is deeper, higher, broader, and more stable than any and all organizations. We believe that all people who believe in Christ as their personal Savior are our brothers in the common salvation, whether they be in the Catholic communion, or in a Protestant communion, or in any other communion, or in no communion.”¹⁰

At the same time, the Convention again expressed its opposition to organic union, claiming that Baptist distinctives were non-negotiable: “Any union founded on compromise and spurious appeals is a sham union, and will debilitate and retard the progress of Christianity the world over. Any such union must inevitably end in a wide apostasy, followed by inertia, indefiniteness, confusion, and waste of spiritual force.”¹¹

The SBC would strictly avoid union with other denominations, but it was not opposed to cooperation. On the contrary: “Pending the working out of the problem of union we are glad to say that we stand ready at all times to cooperate with all our fellow Christians and our fellow citizens, whether Protestant or Catholic, whether Jew or Gentile, in every worthy effort for the moral and social uplift of humanity, as well as for the equal civil and religious rights of all men in all lands.”¹²

The principle was thus reset: Ecclesiastical separation would be combined with openness to cooperation in areas of common concern—but without compromise. The 1938 report is a clear statement of Baptist principles, and it is fundamental to all successive statements.

The timing was very important, for the very next year the Convention received an invitation to join the World Council of Churches. The SBC responded to the invitation in 1940 by adopting a report prepared by a committee led by George W. Truett. The Convention thanked the Council for its invitation, but declined based upon two considerations. First, the Convention lacked any ecclesiastical authority. Second, the Convention resisted “totalitarian trends” that threatened the autonomy of the churches.

Later, the SBC would also decline to join the National Council of Churches (and the Federal Council, its predecessor). Despite the urgings of significant SBC leaders, the Convention also declined to join the National Association of Evangelicals. In so doing the Convention sought to be consistent in the application of its polity.

In 1963 the Convention adopted a revised version of the *Baptist Faith & Message*, affirming and expanding upon its earlier statement. The 1963 version included important sections under articles XIV and XV. The article on “Co-operation” was expanded, retaining the basis wording of the 1925 statement. The closing sentence of the article reads: “Co-operation is desirable between the various Christian denominations, when the end to be attained is in itself justified, and when such co-operation involves no violation of conscience or compromise of loyalty to Christ and his Word as revealed in the New Testament.”¹³

The 1963 statement added an article on “The Christian and the Social Order” that included the following important sentence: “In order to promote these ends Christians should be ready to work with all persons of good will in any good cause, always being careful to act in the spirit of love without compromising their loyalty to Christ and his truth.”¹⁴

Conclusion

This review of significant SBC decisions and statements reveals a remarkable consistency in approach. The following principles and practices reflect this consistent trajectory:

1. Southern Baptists stand unalterably opposed to any ecumenical or interchurch union not based upon common convictions and practices drawn from the teachings of the Bible. That is, Southern Baptists will not negotiate a union that would violate our understandings of regenerate church membership, local church autonomy, free church polity, the ordinances,

etc.

2. Southern Baptists are nevertheless committed to the unity of the churches—but this is a spiritual union until such time as others convince us that we are in error, or join us on the basis of common conviction.
3. Though opposed to movements toward federation or organic union, Southern Baptists are committed to work with other evangelical denominations in common causes, and count all those who know the Lord Jesus as Savior to be true Christians and our true brothers and sisters. While we differ on important issues such as church government and the nature of the ordinances (*i.e.* opposing all sacramentalism), we nonetheless consider these brothers and sisters to be true Christians with whom we can work toward legitimate spiritual ends (*i.e.*, evangelism and missions).
4. Though considering non-Christians and the Roman Catholic Church to be the objects of our spiritual concern and evangelistic mission, we are nonetheless committed to work with “all men of good will in any good cause.” Thus, we can work with secular Americans and Roman Catholic leaders in common cause for the abolition of abortion, the defense of marriage, and in contending for religious liberty, these offered as examples only.

Consistent with these principles, Southern Baptists rejected calls for structural unity and declined membership in the National Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches. This has proved to be most wise, for those two councils have fulfilled the worst fears of the Southern Baptists who first declined to join them. A “sham union” has come to characterize these two councils and the larger ecumenical movement. Both are now in captivity to their most radical and liberal elements, and both have rejected biblical Christianity in favor of a modern post-Christian apostasy. The councils have moved from a “lowest common denominator” of theological conviction to the outright repudiation of the Gospel itself. We must be thankful for the wisdom of our forefathers.

Likewise, consistent with our principles, Southern Baptists have engaged in common spiritual causes with Christians of other denominations. In the nineteenth century, Southern Baptists were active participants in the evangelistic crusades of D. L. Moody—along with other denominations and their leaders. As the twentieth century dawned, Southern Baptists were actively involved in the Bible conference movement and shared platforms with ministers of other denominations. Through this exposure, Southern Baptists came to adopt evangelistic strategies developed in other denominations, even as we shared our own witness with the larger evangelical world. 15

Southern Baptists have been eager participants in the evangelistic ministry of Billy Graham—himself a Southern Baptist—who established the paradigm for twentieth-century regional crusades. These crusades involved sponsorship and participation of ministers and laypersons from many denominations.

The mission boards have participated in various endeavors with the boards of other denominations and in parachurch evangelistic movements. Missiological strategies shared among evangelical mission agencies have become a necessity on the international scene. The theological seminaries encourage their faculty members to contribute to theological and biblical scholarship in arenas such as the Evangelical Theological Society. Southern Baptist participation has been essential to the success of groups such as the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy and the Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood. For many years, the SBC has been a participant and contributor to the American Bible Society. All these are examples of appropriate involvement consistent with the principles laid down by the Convention.

In sum, the Southern Baptist Convention has exhibited a remarkably consistent pattern of cooperation without compromise. This has operated at three levels. First, there can be no structural unity without true biblical unity. Our true unity with other Christians is spiritual. Second, we can faithfully cooperate with other evangelical Christians in the accomplishment of spiritual goals, such as evangelism, missions, and the defense and propagation of biblical truth. Third, we should cooperate with non-Christians and non-evangelicals in common cultural and moral causes. This must be done without violating Baptist principles or restricting Baptist witness.

Southern Baptists have been consistently zealous in protecting the structural independence of the Convention as well as its liberty of action. At the same time, the Convention has affirmed the spiritual unity of all true Christians, regardless of denomination. Based on Baptist convictions, the Convention can recognize Christians of other denominations as true believers without affirming the judgment that their church is a true New Testament church. This essential distinction helps to define the approach Southern Baptists have taken in interdenominational relations. In the final analysis, the conviction of the Convention is *cooperation without compromise*.

Endnotes:

1. *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1890*. (Nashville: Southern Baptist Convention, 1890).
2. The three points were: “1. The original creed of Christs Church. 2. The ordinances of his appointment. 3. The life which has the sinless Son of man as its perfect exemplification. [*sic.*]” See William Wright Barnes, *The Southern Baptist Convention 1845-1953* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1954), p. 272.
3. *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1909* (Nashville: Southern Baptist Convention, 1909), pp. 27-28.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Barnes, p. 276.
6. *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1914* (Nashville: Southern Baptist Convention, 1914), p. 76. All italicized sections in this paper are for editorial emphasis and do not appear in the original citations.
7. “Address of President Gambrell,” in *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1919* (Nashville: Southern Baptist Convention, 1919), p. 19.
8. *Baptist Faith and Message* [1925]. See *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1925*, Nashville: Southern Baptist Convention, 1925.
9. John R. Sampey, *Memoirs of John R. Sampey* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1947), pp. 251-252.
10. *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1938* (Nashville: Southern Baptist Convention, 1938), p. 24.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Baptist Faith and Message* [1963]. See *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1963* (Nashville: Southern Baptist Convention, 1963), p. 269-81.
14. *Ibid.*
15. See Charles S. Kelley, Jr., *How Did They Do It? The Story of Southern Baptist Evangelism* (New Orleans: Insight Press 1990).

