

Executive Committee endorses SBC pullout from Baptist World Alliance_22304

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NASHVILLE (ABP)—Southern Baptist Convention leaders intent on severing ties with the Baptist World Alliance have taken a major step in that direction.

Despite pleas from Baptist leaders worldwide and some Southern Baptists not to leave the BWA, the SBC Executive Committee voted 62-10 last week to approve a recommendation to withdraw SBC membership and funding from the BWA, the 99-year-old fellowship of 211 Baptist bodies worldwide.

Executive Committee members said protecting the SBC's theological identity is more important than preserving worldwide Baptist unity.

The proposal now will go to messengers of the Southern Baptist Convention in June for final approval. The action would take effect Oct. 1, deleting the final \$300,000 of annual SBC support for the Baptist World Alliance, which has an annual budget of \$1.7 million.

The Southern Baptist Convention, with 16 million members, is the largest member body and biggest contributor to the BWA, which represents 43 million Baptists. But SBC leaders say the international organization has become too liberal, a charge Baptist leaders worldwide deny.

The hour-long debate was limited to Executive Committee members only. BWA General Secretary Denton Lotz was present but was not invited to speak to the recommendation.

"We are, of course, very sad," Lotz told Associated Baptist Press after the vote. "Any time there is a breach in fellowship, it is sad. ... We're going out sad, but we're going out with love for Southern Baptists."

SBC Executive Committee President Morris Chapman presented the two-page report and recommendation calling for the SBC to withdraw from the global Baptist organization.

He described an earlier report released in December as an interim report that serves as background to the committee's final recommendation.

The initial report complained the BWA sanctions theological positions contrary to Southern Baptists' conservative views and has ignored the SBC's complaints.

"Continuing to allow presentations that call into question the truthfulness of Holy Scripture, refusing to support openly the idea that all who are saved must come to the salvation through conscious faith in Jesus Christ, and promoting women as preachers and pastors are among the issues that make it impossible to endorse the BWA as a genuinely representative organization of world Baptists," the study committee said.

The BWA, as well as its member groups, has consistently denied those charges. When the SBC announced its plan to withdraw last December, Baptist leaders from around the world voiced strong support for BWA and

dismay at the charges of liberalism.

“The BWA rejects categorically this false accusation of liberalism,” Lotz said in December. “Of course, there is a spectrum of theological thought in all of our conventions, just as in local churches, but we belong to one another because we belong to Christ.”

In its final report, the nine-member study committee claimed some BWA leaders, including Lotz, “took the opportunity to vent what appears to be pent-up feelings of hostility about our convention” in response to the December report.

“Due to these revelations, we need not now justify or vilify, but can simply do what we preferred to do in the first place, which is to politely withdraw from an organization that, at least for us, no longer efficiently communicates to the unsaved a crystal-clear gospel message that our Lord Jesus Christ is solely sufficient for salvation,” the report stated.

Some Southern Baptist leaders, including study committee member Jerry Rankin, president of the International Mission Board, said the SBC proposal is based in part on the BWA's decision last year to admit the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship into membership. Southern Baptist leaders strongly oppose the Fellowship, which was formed by Southern Baptists dissatisfied with the denomination's fundamentalist direction.

While “much has been made about the inclusion of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship into the BWA as having been the cause of our present recommendation to withdraw from the organization,” the final report added, “one soaked by a rain need not blame the last raindrop.”

“The decision of the BWA to include the CBF merely served as a confirmation that we must, as a convention, allow the world to see us without having to look through a BWA lens—a lens which for us has become too cloudy.”

The plan approved by the Executive Committee calls for SBC leaders to study how the convention “may establish an even closer bond of fellowship with conservative evangelical Christians around the world” and earmarks the deleted BWA allocation for that effort.

“For us, the decision is one of stewardship,” the report states. “If we can multiply the harvest by reapplying the funds, there is no true Christian who should take issue.”

“We believe we can take the money being contributed to the Baptist World Alliance and we can begin to build strong bridges with conservative evangelical Christian Baptists in all parts of the world,” Chapman explained.

While “we do not intend to organize a fellowship body similar to the Baptist World Alliance,” he said committee members believe international networking efforts will produce “a much stronger contribution to our witness to the world.”

The Executive Committee limited debate to committee members only, suggesting others would be able to speak to the BWA issue during the June SBC meeting.

Speaking against the study committee proposal, Executive Committee member Nancy McGuigan of Coatesville, Pa., read a resolution adopted by a committee of the Baptist Convention of Pennsylvania/South Jersey.

Urging SBC and BWA leaders “to begin immediately to find a way for reconciliation for the good of the kingdom,” the resolution called on Baptists around the world “to pray fervently for God to bring unity through the power of Christ and to bring reconciliation between the BWA and the SBC for a unified witness to a world in need of Christ.”

Calvin Wittman, a pastor from Arvada, Colo., commended the study

committee for its report. He affirmed the plan to withdraw from the BWA “since we are not in agreement theologically and in the ways we seek to practice the Great Commission.”

National Woman's Missionary Union President Janet Hoffman, also a member of the Executive Committee, issued a call for Baptist unity.

Citing WMU's commitment to continue to support the work of BWA and its women's department, Hoffman said, “It would be a blessing in the view of many if we did not rush to judgment” before SBC and BWA leaders explored ways to find unity.

Addressing the committee's focus on stewardship, Hoffman said, “There is a stewardship of witness involved here too.” She said the witness of the SBC's Empowering Kingdom Growth ministry emphasis “is diluted by division but is multiplied by unity.”

Bruce Martin, a pastor from Fayetteville, N.C., responded that SBC leaders also “have biblical responsibilities” that extend beyond a call for unity.

Citing the recommendation's call for the study committee to meet with BWA representatives prior to the SBC annual meeting, Martin proposed that the Executive Committee action be contingent on the outcome of that meeting. His motion was ruled out of order prior to the vote on the study committee proposal.

Chapman said the bottom-line question is: “Does the Baptist World Alliance best represent who we are to Christians and Baptists around the world or has the time come that Southern Baptists can best represent themselves? We do have the voluntary right to withdraw just as we have the voluntary right to engage.”

Bob Casey from Parkview Baptist Church in Gainesville, Fla., came to Nashville prior the SBC Executive Committee meeting. There he began a

weeklong fast and daily prayerwalk around the SBC building in a Joshua-like attempt to prevent the denomination from leaving the BWA. He had hoped to address the Executive Committee, but he was not granted permission.

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