

SBC says doctrinal statement ‘sufficient,’ but impact on hiring remains unclear

June 14, 2007

Posted: 6/13/07

SBC says doctrinal statement ‘sufficient,’ but impact on hiring remains unclear

By Greg Warner

Associated Baptist Press

SAN ANTONIO—The Southern Baptist Convention affirmed the Baptist Faith & Message June 12 as the “sufficient” doctrinal guide for its agencies and institutions. But SBC leaders immediately disagreed over whether the action will keep those agencies from adopting more restrictive policies.

The motion was supported by messengers who worry the SBC’s conservative leaders have gone too far in limiting participation in the 16 million-member convention. They cite controversial hiring guidelines, adopted last year at the International Mission Board, that exclude missionaries who practice a “private prayer language”—a type of speaking in tongues.

Supporters called the SBC vote—58 percent to 42 percent—a victory for more openness in the conservative-dominated convention. “This is the

biggest decision in the Southern Baptist Convention in a decade,” said Oklahoma pastor Wade Burleson, an IMB trustee who has led opposition to the “private prayer” policy. “The SBC has said it doesn’t want the agencies going against the convention.”

“The consensus of the convention is to follow the Baptist Faith & Message,” said Rick Garner, pastor of Liberty Heights Baptist Church in Liberty Township, Ohio, who introduced the motion. “If they feel like they need to go beyond that ... they will need to come back to the convention floor” to amend the doctrinal statement.

But two seminary presidents told messengers June 13 that, when hiring faculty members, they will use additional doctrinal restrictions not covered in the Baptist Faith & Message, such as opposition to abortion and gambling.

Al Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, said doctrinal threats arise from time to time that are not covered in the SBC’s faith statement. “You don’t want to hire those who merely meet those requirements,” he said, but those who thoroughly meet the standards.

Phil Roberts, president of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, described the Baptist Faith & Message as a “minimalist statement” that does not comment on everything affirmed in the Bible.

Midwestern requires more of its employees than the doctrinal statement specifies, Roberts said. For instance, the Old Testament prohibits “cross-dressing,” he said during his seminary report. “Any morning that one of our Steves shows up dressed like an Eve, that will be the last day they work on our campus.”

The SBC-approved motion, which was adopted by the Executive Committee in February, affirms: “The Baptist Faith & Message is neither a creed, nor a complete statement of faith, nor final or infallible; nevertheless, we further

acknowledge that it is the only consensus statement of doctrinal beliefs approved by the Southern Baptist Convention and as such is sufficient in its current form to guide trustees in their establishment of policies and practices of entities of the convention.”

SBC Executive Committee President Morris Chapman with those who say policies should not exceed the doctrinal statement.

“Any practice instituted by an entity in the Southern Baptist Convention that has the force of doctrine should be in accord with the Baptist Faith & Message and not exceed its boundaries unless and until it has been approved” by convention messengers, Chapman said during his annual address.

“Secondly,” Chapman continued, “if an entity ... adopts a confession of faith separate and distinct from the Baptist Faith & Message, and it includes a doctrine unsupported by our confessional statement, the entity should request approval from the convention prior to including the doctrine in its confession.”

During floor debate on Garner’s motion June 12, Jeremy Green, pastor of First Baptist Church of Joshua, Texas, agreed the doctrinal statement is “a sufficient guide, but the Baptist Faith & Message is not the only guide” for hiring. “I believe voting for this motion is a step in the wrong direction,” he said.

Dwight McKissic, pastor of Cornerstone Baptist Church in Arlington, Texas, spoke in favor of the motion, insisting the SBC agencies “should be subordinate to the Southern Baptist Convention.” Children don’t set the rules; parents do, he said.

McKissic, a trustee of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, ran afoul of trustee leaders recently when he acknowledged using a “private prayer language” and criticized the IMB for its hiring restriction. He said

he lead his church to join the SBC on the basis of the Baptist Faith & Message, but “now decisions are being made that are not consistent with it.”

After the motion passed, Benjamin Cole, a pastor and blogger in Arlington, Texas, said the SBC establishment “will have a very difficult time” imposing restrictions that go beyond the doctrinal statement. But he warned, “The other side is going to say (the motion) doesn’t mean what it says.”

Messengers who voted on the motion seemed reluctant to add restrictions beyond the Baptist Faith & Message.

“Where do we stop?” said Joe Manning, pastor of First Baptist Church in Pearl City, Hawaii. “I believe the Baptist Faith & Message is a starting point, but there are so many issues that can’t be defined and that’s were the churches need to step in. ... Who are we to dictate what (people) should or shouldn’t do in their private prayer closet?”

“I voted in favor of it, and I was happy to see that it passed,” said Sid Nichols, director of missions at Calhoun Baptist Association in Anniston, Ala. “I think the SBC ought to stand up and say ‘this is who we are and this is what we believe,’” Nichols said. “And I believe that is what this motion does.”

In other business, the convention referred a motion to its Executive Committee that called for the SBC to study establishing a registry of clergy sexual offenders. The database would include ministers and church staff members “who have been credibly accused of, personally confessed to, or legally been convicted of sexual harassment or abuse.”

The database would be accessible to Southern Baptist churches and entities to help prevent future abuse. The motion, presented by Burleson, asked the Executive Committee to report its findings and recommendations no later than the 2008 convention.

Other motions referred to the Executive Committee were:

- To develop a conventionwide policy that would allow Southern Baptists who hold “differing interpretations” of speaking in tongues to be “full participants” in the SBC.
- Requiring nominees to SBC committees and boards to disclose any disagreements they have with the Baptist Faith & Message.
- Asking the Executive Committee to pay expenses for SBC officers to attend the annual convention. The motion was presented by outgoing second vice president Wiley Drake of Buena Park, Calif.
- Urging that the convention be held in cities which have not hosted the SBC in the last 20 years.

Several motions were referred to other entities:

- A motion requesting more ministries for handicapped people was referred to the Executive Committee and all SBC entities.
- Also referred to the Executive Committee and every other SBC entity was a motion asking each SBC agency or institution to study providing reports of its trustees’ attendance and voting records.
- A motion requesting more resources for one-staff-member churches was referred to Lifeway Christian Resources and the North American Mission Board.
- A motion requesting the American flag be presented by an honor guard during the annual meeting was referred to the committee on order of business.

Several motions were ruled out of order because they are under the purview of individual agencies’ trustees and not the convention:

- A motion to study the salaries of SBC seminary professors. Bart Barber of Farmersville, Texas, who offered the motion, argued it did not interfere with the seminaries' governance because it only asked for a study, but messengers disagreed.
- A motion to instruct SBC agencies and institutions to avoid promoting the "emerging church."
- A motion directing Lifeway Christian Resources to review its policy on distributing "fables and allegories."

News of religion, faith, missions, Bible study and Christian ministry among Texas Baptist churches, in the BGCT, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and around the world.