

Editorial: What the future may look like for (Southern) Baptists

June 16, 2021

As I write, I am watching the second day of business proceedings during the 2021 Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting. It is possible during these proceedings to see at least one year into the future of the SBC. Careful observers can see even further ahead.

The near future and beyond for the SBC—and some other Baptists—will involve tension and anxiety over social issues and institutional structures and control. Some of that discomfort comes as individual Southern Baptists assert their rightful expectation that SBC agencies and entities will be held accountable.

Evidence of division

On Day One, [messengers voted](#) to decide which of four men would succeed outgoing SBC President J.D. Greear—Randy Adams, Ed Litton, Albert Mohler or Mike Stone. At this point, you may know the winner and that it took a runoff, but knowing the winner isn't the whole story.

In the first vote, 15,678 messengers were registered, and 14,300 cast ballots. In the runoff between Stone and Litton, 15,691 messengers were registered, and 13,131 cast ballots. Stone received 5,216 votes in the first round; Litton received 4,630. In the second round, Stone received 6,278, and Litton received 6,834 votes—47.81 percent to 52.04 percent. The remaining 0.15 percent of ballots were disallowed for various reasons.

I list the numbers, not to confuse you, but so you can see that during both rounds, Mike Stone—the candidate favored and promoted by the Conservative Baptist Network—had strong support among the messengers.

Regardless of anything else that happened during the 2021 SBC annual meeting, one thing is certain: Two groups of conservatives will vie for control of the SBC in the coming year. This tussle may grow to the point that one group decides to form its own convention.

Such is not without precedent in Baptist life. Consider the formation of the SBC in 1845 as a split from Northern Baptists; the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in 1991 in response to the so-called fundamentalist takeover of the SBC; the Southern Baptist Conservatives of Virginia in 1993 as a separation from the Baptist General Association of Virginia; and the Southern Baptists of Texas Convention in 1998 in opposition to the Baptist General Convention of Texas. The latter started within the BGCT as the Conservative Baptist Fellowship of Texas, later becoming the Southern Baptists of Texas in 1995 while still within the BGCT.

Concern about such division was addressed consistently during the 2021 SBC annual meeting, including an entire sermon by Willy Rice, senior pastor of Calvary Church in Clearwater, Fla., during the second day of business. Rice admonished the SBC for being known more for its internal disputes than for Pauline descriptions of love, joy and peace.

Evidence of unity

The first day of business was pretty tranquil, all things considered. During lengthy discussion of proposed amendments to several resolutions, the hall was free of rancor, though not free of understandable disagreement. Only once did Greear—serving in his capacity as chair of the proceedings—admonish booing messengers, telling them they would not

vote that way.

The otherwise apparent politeness exhibited by messengers and leaders may have been a veneer over deep tension and anxiety, or it may be the actual substance of the convention. Issues under discussion give some evidence both are the case.

Southern Baptist messengers and leaders seemed unequivocally united on the scourge of theological liberalism and opposition to racism, critical race theory and abortion. They did not argue with one another about these things.

However, their repeated and strident denunciations of those four things, consistent messenger questions concerning them, proposed amendments to resolutions about them, and numerous appeals to convention rules belie a deep tension and anxiety within the convention tied to issues the convention seems united in opposing.

Tension and anxiety within the SBC are a direct reflection of the same tension and anxiety within American society at large. It is ironic that a group of people who proclaim the sufficiency of Scripture and the Lordship of Jesus Christ seem so anxious, and yet, they are. And they likely will be for the foreseeable future.

Evidence of distrust

The differences evident among messengers to the 2021 SBC annual meeting do not have to lead to rancor or division. Such separation is not inevitable, even if it is possible. Two occasions serve as examples; both involve messengers' trust in core SBC committees.

At the end of a long day of business, Bill Ascol, messenger from Bethel Baptist Church in Owasso, Okla., moved that Resolution 3 on abortion be

pulled out of committee and debated on the floor, because the resolution did not condemn abortion strongly enough. Namely, it did not call for the complete abolition of abortion.

To pass, the motion required a two-thirds majority vote of messengers present. It passed without difficulty, effectively communicating to the Committee on Resolutions their work on that issue was a failure. Messengers debated, amended and adopted the resolution Wednesday afternoon.

Similarly, Grant Gaines, pastor of and messenger from Belle Aire Baptist Church in Murfreesboro, Tenn., moved that the SBC Executive Committee be investigated—for alleged mishandling of sexual abuse claims—by a neutral party not selected by the Executive Committee. In speaking to his motion, he said—to resounding applause—that the Executive Committee needs to regain the trust of the convention and a watching world.

The Committee on Order of Business earlier referred Gaines' motion to committee. Gaines appealed that ruling, and messengers supported his appeal overwhelmingly. In doing so, they overruled the Committee on Order of Business. After somewhat brief debate, messengers adopted Gaines' motion overwhelmingly, expressing their intent to know the truth about sexual abuse allegations in SBC churches.

Both instances signal distrust among the convention at large in core committees of the SBC tasked with overseeing convention business. Should that distrust grow, tension and anxiety already present in the denomination will be aggravated further. Some may even capitalize on that distrust for their own ends.

Evidence of confidence needed

Motions adopted during the 2021 SBC annual meeting set in motion a specific set of actions to be accomplished during the following year. Beyond those actions, there will continue to be a struggle between one group of Southern Baptist conservatives and another group of the same.

Additionally, the SBC grass roots has made it known the wrong of sexual abuse will not be tolerated, nor will they stand for the cover up of sexual abuse. This accountability seems to generate tension and anxiety among some institutional leaders.

Tension and anxiety are a strong undertow undermining desired and actual unity anywhere. To escape the pull, Southern Baptists' confidence in the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the sufficiency of Scripture will need to speak louder than their tension and anxiety.

Eric Black is the executive director, publisher and editor of the Baptist Standard. He can be reached at eric.black@baptiststandard.com or on Twitter at [@EricBlackBSP](https://twitter.com/EricBlackBSP).