

2nd Opinion: SBC annual meetings demonstrate conflict resolution

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EDITOR'S NOTE: This op-ed is in response to Eric Black's [editorial](#), published June 16, 2021, on the 2021 SBC annual meeting.

I do not envy the task of journalists trying to describe any annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention. Doing so must have been exceptionally difficult this year. I witnessed several moments in which long-tenured messengers well-attuned to the inner workings of the convention stood backstage, jaws agape, saying, "What just happened?"

Most Southern Baptists can remain mystified with little consequence, but journalists must summarize the meeting and do so on a deadline.

I therefore am sympathetic with the task of those who have tried to present you with a digest of last week's events. Nevertheless, I would like to offer a summary different from others you may have read.

I believe our 2021 annual meeting was a tremendous success, and I believe the Southern Baptist Convention is in good health.

"How can this be?" you ask. "I've read the Southern Baptist Convention is deeply divided, and distrust is more palpable and intense than it has been in decades."

Success and health of the SBC

No moment has existed in the 176-year history of the SBC when some chronicler could not have written about division and distrust in our ranks. Indeed, this is not unique to Baptists. No such moment has existed in the nearly-2,000-year history of Christianity.

Division and distrust, in varying degrees, are perpetual companions of Christianity. Sometimes they have been enemies to the progress of the faith—such as in 1054 A.D., when Eastern and Western Christianity split from one another.

On other occasions, division and distrust have made Christianity healthier. Division about state churches, and distrust of those who led the synthesis of church and state, led to significant changes that have improved the health of both church and state.

The yoking together of large numbers of churches naturally is going to yield differences of opinion. There's nothing out of the ordinary about that. Every marriage encounters diversity of opinion, as does every business partnership and every local church experience. So, why shouldn't large families of churches experience conflict?

The difference between a healthy marriage and an unhealthy one, I always tell couples seated in my office at the church, is not that some couples experience conflict while other couples do not. All couples face conflict in their marriages. The difference is some couples resolve their conflicts, while others accumulate unresolved conflict until they reach the breaking point.

Just as within a marriage, the measure of the health of the SBC and the measure of the success of this year's annual meeting lies not in whether conflict existed, but in whether the meeting moved us toward resolution

and whether the resolution was a healthy one.

Majority support for resolutions

The SBC entrusted me this year with a spot on the Committee on Resolutions. We prepared 10 resolutions to present to messengers at the 2021 annual meeting. These resolutions touched upon some of the most controversial topics in Southern Baptist life today: racial reconciliation, the Jan. 6 insurrection, church sexual abuse, religious liberty and the LGBTQ movement.

We *prepared* 10 resolutions, but we were able to *present* nine of them. These resolutions generated so much discussion and so many proposed amendments that we ran out of time to adopt them all. Also, one of the resolutions about abortion we declined to propose was brought out of committee over the objection of our committee.

Is all this discussion and amendment activity evidence of distrust in our committee and disunity among the messenger body? Some might construe it that way.

But consider this evidence. The convention adopted every one of those nine resolutions with strong majorities.

The resolution “On the Sufficiency of Scripture for Race and Racial Reconciliation”—the most controversial topic among Southern Baptists for the past two years—passed with an obvious supermajority of support.

Yes, we witnessed some difference of opinion, but in the end, a preponderance of the messengers were unified in one voice.

Value of annual meetings

We narrowly decided our presidential election, but the votes on the issues surrounding the presidential election—race, sexual abuse, Executive Committee policy—weren't narrow at all. A lot of people were puzzled by this.

How does nearly half of the convention vote for Mike Stone for president, while very few messengers vote to amend a resolution to insert an explicit condemnation of critical race theory?

So many factors go into SBC presidential elections. The nominating speech sways a lot of messengers. Geography and personal relationships play a role. People are complex and do not yield readily to analysis.

In a manner reminiscent of pollsters covering our secular political elections, our denominational pundits obviously are struggling to understand Southern Baptists these days.

The best answer I can imagine is this: Southern Baptists are independent-minded and diverse. There's a middle ground between division and groupthink. There's a middle ground between disunity and sycophancy.

The 2021 SBC annual meeting occupied that middle ground. We were able to vote "Aye" and equally able to vote "Nay." We had the freedom to disagree, and yet the power of the Spirit enabled us to agree most of the time.

I have determined to dislike conflict but never to be afraid of it. My forecast for the SBC? More conflict.

And yet, I also will make this prediction: Although we will have conflict at our annual meeting in 2030, it will be conflict about different topics than the ones we faced this year. Why? Because our annual meeting works.

The annual meeting brings us answers and resolution, enabling us to move on to the next difficult decision and the critical votes that will accompany it. It did so this year, and we move forward together.

Mission accomplished.

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