

**VOICES FROM THE PAST; VOICES FOR THE PEW:
*History of Support of the Direct Linkage
Between Trustees and the SBC Churches***

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Outsiders often assume that the president of the Southern Baptist Convention sits at the top of a denominational hierarchy, supervises a vast denominational bureaucracy, and directs the work of the Convention by a command-and-control system of authority. This is a natural assumption, for this would be the case in hierarchical systems of denominational polity. But the Southern Baptist Convention is not a hierarchical system, and no individual sits at the top of a denominational flowchart.¹

In his forward to the author's book on the lives of the fifty-two Southern Baptist Convention presidents, Dr. R. Albert Mohler adroitly notes the clear distinction of polity between the Free Church movement, in which Southern Baptists are found, and all other forms of external and internal ecclesiastical authority. We have no ruler. We have no owner. We are a voluntary cooperation of local churches, which have the singular authority to maintain their autonomy. As shall be seen, the trustee system was a systematic and conscious choice by Southern Baptist forefathers to maintain explicitly the direct linkage between the institutions we own and the local churches. As shall be further noted, any violation of the direct linkage between trustees and churches is a direct violation of Southern Baptist's historical stance on polity.

This article will be a brief examination of the sermons and writings of former SBC presidents, extolling the supreme voice of the membership of local churches, over and beyond

¹R. Albert Mohler, "Forward," in Emir Caner and Ergun Caner, *The Sacred Trust* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), ix.

any structure or officers who serve those members. These voices of Baptist history will serve as a backdrop for the present controversy between the Executive Committee and the trustees and president of the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary and will hopefully provide some guidance. Since the adoption of the Constitution in 1845, Southern Baptists have been careful to maintain a “ground level” form of authority, exalting the autonomous voice of the local church over any form of external authority. Even in the very organization of the Convention, this attempt at blocking a nascent hierarchy was clear.

Separate Institutions, Separate States and Separate Powers

On May 8, 1845, 293 messengers gathered in Augusta, Georgia for the inaugural meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention. With meager resources and a slim roster, these Baptists formed for the purpose of uniting in stewardship for the Great Commission. One would assume with such humble beginnings, the messengers would conserve their combined wealth and find a central location from which they could work. This would only seem reasonable to anyone understanding organizational philosophy, communication needs and structural coordination.

The formation of the two boards at that meeting, however, betrayed a philosophical bias. Both the Foreign Mission Board and the Domestic Mission Board would be directly tied to the member churches, yet would maintain separate and autonomous leadership. The Foreign Mission Board was to be located in Richmond, Virginia, and the Domestic Mission Board was to be located in Marion, Alabama. Was this demarcation accidental? Was the purpose of such a distinct line in authority purely a financial consideration? In the author’s opinion, no. In fact, the case can be made that the very reason for the formation of the Southern Baptist Convention was an issue of autonomy and linkage to the voice of the local church. A central location would

suggest a central authority. In Keathley and Harsch's [*A Program of Cooperation*](#), this glaring point emphasizes a Convention built upon cooperation, not centralization.²

In [*The Relation of the Southern Baptist Convention to Its Entities: A Response to Charles Kelley's The Baptist Way*](#), Dr. David Hankins argues Baptist history has "no record of undue fear of centralization or creeping connectionalism or any other threat to Baptist polity."³ Is this correct? Even during the pre-1845 formation of the Southern Baptist Convention, some leaders were decidedly wary of any form of governance that would exert its voice over the individual churches.

Francis Wayland (1796-1865), Baptist pastor in Boston and university president, was a driving force in the formation of the Triennial Convention in 1814. Along with Richard Furman, Wayland sought to unite Baptists in the missionary endeavor by combining resources in sending out like-minded missionaries. By 1859, however, he had become reluctant to participate in the work, due to the abuses that he saw as inherent in any such organization. More to the point, Wayland explicitly feared any form of connectionalism among Baptists, and saw such as a direct violation of Baptist polity. In *Thoughts on the Missionary Organizations of the Baptist Denomination*, he wrote,

I remark, then, in the first place, that centralizing organizations are certainly not in strict accordance with the principles of benevolence made known by our Lord. Christ always speaks of benevolence as an especial means of grace to the believer. . . . He evidently intends that every individual shall, so far as possible, do his own charity, just as much as he shall do his own praying. . . . Now, a central organization is at variance with these principles.⁴

²Ken Keathley and Lloyd Harsch, "[*A Program of Cooperation: A Rejoinder to David Hankins' The Relation of the Southern Baptist Convention to Its Entities*](#)," 5-6.

³Hankins, 9.

⁴Francis Wayland, *Thoughts on the Missionary Organizations of the Baptist Denomination* (New York: Sheldon, Blakeman & Co., 1859), 4-36. As cited in Leon McBeth, *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage* (Nashville: Broadman, 1990), 280-1.

It is important to note that Wayland was discussing the actual giving of monies toward a central cause, but rather than this being considered off point, it is actually further proof of the central premise. Even in such a seminal issue as missions, Baptists have been suspicious of any organizational structure that would allow one voice to speak for the rest. It is further important to note Wayland was speaking of men with whom he had worked for decades and loved dearly. Yet his conviction remained—any central structure is a violation, not only of Baptist polity but also New Testament teaching.

A more contemporary voice may be added as further proof that connectionalism has been rejected by Southern Baptists. Dr. James David Grey (1906-1985) was pastor of the First Baptist Church of New Orleans, and the twenty-sixth president of the Southern Baptist Convention. In his Presidential Address to the messengers in annual session in 1952, Grey was emphatic:

The nature of our Convention is and has been clearly set forth as non-ecclesiastical, non-hierarchical, and non-authoritarian. There appear to be three well-defined constitutional theories concerning the membership of the Southern Baptist Convention—federal, ecclesiastical, and voluntary. But since this Convention is composed of messengers and does not constitute a federation of state conventions, district associations, and local churches, it appears to be the part of wisdom to adhere to the original Baptist constitutional theory of voluntary membership.⁵

Grey's belief in the local church, over against any central agency, was even stated in very practical terms later in his address:

We who are officers of the Convention, executives of its various boards, agencies, committees, and commissions must scrupulously avoid such unwarranted claims as, '*I speak for (all) Southern Baptists.*' This must hold even when a resolution has been passed by the Convention in session. Let us remember this Convention is composed of *messengers and not delegates*.⁶

⁵Ergun Caner and Emir Caner, *The Sacred Desk: Sermons of the Southern Baptist Convention Presidents* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2004), 172.

⁶*Ibid.*

William B. Johnson: Autonomy as the Cause for the Formation of the SBC

Popular historical lore marks the division between northern Baptists and Baptists in the south on the issue of slavery. Baptists in the south, scholars would opine, wanted to have the right to keep slaves and still send out missionaries. This clear bifurcation from Scripture almost paints the SBC forefathers as oxymoronic, or even worse, hypocritical. Did our founding fathers split from our northern brethren solely because of their desire to own slaves, all the while desiring to see those slaves won to Christ? Did we want the blacks in our heaven but not in our pews? Did this not make them the highest form of hypocrites, calling for soul autonomy but not allowing their slaves even physical liberty?

The answer is not so simple, nor simplistic. In fact, such a broad-brush pronouncement would assume the ignorance of men of clear learning and conviction. In fact, the case can be strongly made that the Southern Baptist Convention itself was formed because the very issues we are discussing in the NOBTS-Executive Committee Controversy at present were at stake. Baptists in the South felt the voices of local churches, and more specifically their autonomy, was being violated by the Baptists in the north, who wanted to enact and enforce legislation on them as a hierarchical voice.

Indeed, the inaugural message by the first president of the Southern Baptist Convention, William Bullein Johnson (1782-1862), distinctly emphasized that point. Johnson noted that in the winter of 1844, the . . .

Acting Board of the Convention at Boston, adopted a new qualification for missionaries a new special rule, stating “if any one who shall offer himself for a missionary, having slaves, should insist on retaining them as his property, they could not appoint him.” “One thing is certain,’ they continue, ‘we could never be a party to any arrangement which implies approbation of slavery.”⁷

⁷Proceedings of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1845.

The issue was clear: northern Baptists were spiritually offended at the practice of slavery. They decided that all Baptists could not in good conscience hold slaves, especially if they were to be sent out as missionaries. This was a simple issue, correct?

How could the Baptists in the south possibly object? Johnson believed this meeting in Boston, and subsequent resolution, was a direct violation of Baptist polity. No central entity could speak over the voice of the local churches. He continued:

An usurpation of ecclesiastical power quite foreign to our polity. Its obvious tendency was either our final subjugation to that power, or a serious interruption of the flow of Southern benevolence. . . . By this decision, the (Boston) Board had placed itself in direct opposition to the Constitution of the (1814 Triennial) Convention.⁸

In his conclusion, Johnson again cited the fundamental point—an autocratic and external voice, over and above the voice and vote of the autonomous churches, was a violation of Baptist polity. He preached, “for years the pressure of men’s hands has been upon us far too heavily. Our brethren have pressed upon every inch of our privileges and our sacred rights.”⁹

The tangential question that is immediately raised: Was the autonomy issue simply a ruse to justify slavery among Baptists in the south? Allow another Southern Baptist statesman and president, James Bruton Gambrell (1841-1921) to speak to the issue:

There were thousands of men in the South who were Abolitionists. They would have changed the situation if it could have been done, or if they could have seen any way of doing it without imperiling the social order of the South. . . . I, myself, was an Abolitionist.¹⁰

⁸Ibid. If his words were not specific enough, he continues by stating that only the South could speak to the issue, as the indigenous peoples: “*We can never be a party to any arrangement for monopolizing the Gospel: any arrangement which like that of the autocratic interdict of the North, would first drive us from our beloved colored people, of whom they prove that they know nothing comparatively.*”

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰E.C. Routh, *Life Story of Dr. J.B. Gambrell* (Oklahoma City: Routh, 1929), 5.

In Gambrell's mind, it was not a slavery issue, for he was against slavery. It was an autonomy issue.

E. C. Dargan: Cooperation, not Coercion

Edwin Charles Dargan (1852-1930) served as the eleventh president of the Southern Baptist Convention from 1911-1913. As a scholar he served as professor of homiletics and ecclesiology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. As an author, his prodigious pen covered many areas of Baptist life. The work most germane to this discussion was *Ecclesiology*. His emphasis on the cooperation of independent churches could not be clearer:

It is desirable to consider afresh the significance of the local church. It is a body of believers in Christ, baptized into his name, and consecrated to his service; independent of earthly authority, but closely related with others of like mind in promoting the great purposes of God in this world. Each local assembly of God's people is "the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth." As such it is in duty bound to comprehend the divine revelation, and to hold forth through darkness and trial, through weariness and even persecution, the sacred light of God's blessed gospel.¹¹

Dargan's emphasis on cooperation specifically noted the lack of any earthly authority, regardless of how like-minded or benevolent it may be. Any central authority is an inherent breach of Baptist polity. Perhaps it is best said: a conservative bureaucracy is just as invasive as a liberal bureaucracy. One of the greatest examples of such a dynamic tension between cooperation and centralized structure was the formation of the Sunday School Board in 1891.

Gambrell and Frost: No Central Voice

Southern Baptists have produced few stronger leaders than James Marion Frost and James Bruton Gambrell. In the 1890s, Frost began advocating a Sunday School Board that would produce materials that would be made available to all Southern Baptist churches.

¹¹Edwin Charles Dargan, *Ecclesiology: A Study of the Churches*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Charles T. Dearing, 1905), 677.

Gambrell, known to his Baptist brethren as “Uncle Gideon,” was a seminal leader among the churches. In his lifetime, he would serve as a Baptist newspaper editor in Mississippi and Texas, seminary professor at Southwestern Seminary, president of Mercer University, and executive secretary of the Baptist General Convention of Texas. If anyone would hypothetically be in favor of institutional hierarchy, it would be a man such as Gambrell. Yet nothing could be further from the truth.

Gambrell was resoundingly against the formation of the Sunday School Board. His central objection? Baptists could not allow any agency, regardless of the similar conservative views of the leadership, to dictate to the local churches what to preach or teach—ever. More importantly, Gambrell did not stand alone. Baptists were seemingly genetically predisposed against anything that smacked of a liturgical calendar sent from headquarters. As another Baptist luminary, James L. Sullivan recounts:

The Baptist papers in the various states, except the *Baptist and Reflector* (Tenn.) and the *Western Recorder* (Ky.), opposed Frost’s resolutions editorially. Frost’s proposal was considered at the Fort Worth Convention (1890), and a Sunday school committee was set up, which served for one year with headquarters in Louisville. At the Convention in Birmingham the following year (1891), Frost made a motion that the matter be referred to yet another committee, consisting of one member from each state, and that their report be made a special order before that session of the Convention.¹²

The Convention was seemingly at an impasse. State Baptist papers across the nation were resolutely against any agency that would instruct local churches on sermons and lessons. Yet Frost’s intentions were not to violate Baptist polity, but provide another resource for the work. To make this project work, he needed to emphasize a cooperative effort, not a coercive order.

The resolution certainly offers our present dilemma a blueprint for compromise. Frost quickly realized that there could be no power invested in the organization that would police the

¹²James L. Sullivan, “James Marion Frost,” in *Encyclopedia of Southern Baptist*, vol. 1 (Nashville: Broadman, 1958), 512.

local churches. In fact, the inverse was suggested. The local churches would send messengers to the annual meeting, who would in turn appoint trustees, who would hold authority *over* the Sunday School Board. Only then would the local churches remain as the central agent. It was at this juncture that Gambrell evidenced his understanding of Baptist polity. Sullivan continues:

Frost and James Bruton Gambrell, who were made subcommittee to frame the report for the larger committee, held an all-day conference harmonizing their own views concerning the best approach to the perplexing problem. Compromises were reached whereby Gambrell would write the last paragraph of the report and Frost would pen the last sentence. Gambrell stressed complete freedom of the local church in purchasing its literature, while Frost pleaded that a fair chance be given the new board to live and prosper. With President Jonathan Haralson presiding, the Convention dealt with the final resolutions (that) were read by Frost recommending a Sunday School Board. With the timely assistance of John Albert Broadus, the report was adopted without debate and with only 13 opposing votes.¹³

In light of this historical paradigm, one must ask the question: how can one SBC agency, accountable to trustees appointed by messengers who were appointed by local churches, hold direct authority over another SBC agency operating under the same constraints? Both New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary and the Executive Committee are directly answerable to the cooperating SBC churches.

If a central agency, such as the Executive Committee, were given the authority to over rule the Trustees of a given institution, such as New Orleans Seminary, then an unintended hierarchy has developed. We have in fact become centralized.

Neither the intentions nor the orthodoxy of either side of the present conflict is in question. The leaders of the Executive Committee and the trustees and president of the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary are both known to love our Lord, His Word and His commission. Yet the same can be said for the aforementioned Francis Wayland controversy and the Gambrell-Frost conflict. The central issue was not orthodoxy; the central issue was polity.

¹³Ibid.

Carroll and Scarborough: Take it to the Churches, not the Agencies

Another prime example of the line of authority in Baptist polity is the famous admonition of B.H. Carroll. Carroll, the Baptist educator and frontiersman, had invested the last ten years of his life in starting a seminary in Texas. Beginning in 1905, Carroll founded the institution under the auspices of Baylor University. In 1910, the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary had relocated to Fort Worth, Texas, and Carroll had been stricken ill shortly thereafter.

For eighteen months, the leadership of the seminary had been entrusted to Carroll's protege, Lee Rutland Scarborough, as Carroll lay bed-ridden. In November of 1914, Carroll summoned Scarborough to his bedside for a final meeting. Scarborough would later recount Carroll's deathbed admonition:

B.H. Carroll, the greatest man I ever knew, . . . a few days before he died, expecting me, as he wanted me, to succeed him as president of the seminary, . . . pulled himself up by my chair with his hands, and looked me in the face. (He) said, "Lee, keep the Seminary lashed to the cross. If heresy ever comes in the teaching, take it to the faculty. If they will not hear you and take prompt action, take it to the trustees of the Seminary. If they will not hear you, take it to the Convention that appoints the Board of Trustees, and if they will not hear you, take it to the great common people of our churches. You will not fail to get a hearing then."¹⁴

While many contemporary Baptist scholars may emphasize that the local church was listed last in Carroll's words, it can be suggested that the glaring *omission* in the list is the most important here. Carroll *never* mentioned any authoritative agency in relation to the adherence of the seminary to biblical orthodoxy. The line of succession here is clear: Go first to the faculty . . . then the trustees . . . then the Convention in annual meeting . . . then to the churches.

In fact, the case can be made that noting the churches are the final word in Carroll's litany precisely prove the point of President Kelley. Carroll's resolution of any unorthodox

¹⁴Personal account of Scarborough, cited in many places, most notably W.W. Barnes, *The Southern Baptist Convention, 1845-1953* (Nashville: Broadman, 1954), 209.

teaching is the exact inversion of the Baptist model. We begin with the local churches, which nominate the trustees, who are appointed at the Convention in annual session, who elect the faculty. Nowhere in the equation is seen any mention of a hierarchical authority agency. The point is clear, even to other conservative Baptist brethren who call the church the “last resort,” the local church is not the last resort. The local church is the first and last word of authority.

Contemporary Voices: Paschall and Sullivan

Furthermore, theologians and leaders in the last century were equally dogmatic concerning Baptist polity. This issue is not even a conservative-liberal problem. Conservatives and liberals alike, who are students of Baptist history and thought, understand the nature of our chain of command.

Henry Franklin Paschall, longtime pastor of the First Baptist Church of Nashville, was elected the thirty-seventh president of the SBC in 1966. At the press conference following his election, he was asked if Southern Baptists would join the National and World Council of Churches. He said, “I do not favor an organization or ecclesiastical union of the churches. A federated church or counterpart to Rome is not the solution to our problems.^{15c} Any federation, which would inherently have a central agency and sole proprietorship, would go against his doctrine of Baptist ecclesiology.

Perhaps the most resounding endorsement for the linkage of the SBC agencies to the local church through trusteeship came from the pen of James Lenox Sullivan. This lifelong minister and president of the Baptist Sunday School Board wrote a seminal work on Baptist polity. In *Rope of Sand with Strength of Steel*, Sullivan wrote:

¹⁵Albert W. Wardin, Jr., *God's Chosen Path: The Life of H. Franklin Paschall* (Nashville: Gospel Progress, Inc., 2001),

The most important organizational unit of the denomination is the local church. Although the units of organization called associations, statewide bodies usually called state conventions, and the nationwide Southern Baptist Convention have their places, we cannot overemphasize the importance of a local congregation. The local church is more vital than all other areas combined. It is at the local level that ‘the water hits the wheel.’ If work is not done there, it is not done anywhere. If it is done well there, its successes become the denomination’s strength.¹⁶

What Can Possible Go Wrong? The Trial of Luther Rice, 1826

In his paper, President Kelley makes the clear distinction between autonomy and accountability. All SBC entities are, in his estimation, accountable to the Southern Baptist Convention at large and yet autonomous from the other SBC agencies. As Keathley and Harsch record,

Kelley never advocates and has never advocated that the entities are free from the SBC but he insists that the entities are organizationally separate from one another. He repeatedly affirms his conviction that the Southern Baptist Convention has “ownership rights” over all its entities but that there is no pyramid of authority or leadership among the entities.¹⁷

If such a pyramid of authority existed, and if an agency could assert its will on other agencies, would there be any real danger, especially if those involved were like-minded and equally devoted? Baptist history offers at least one tragic warning: the trial and investigation of Luther Rice in 1826.

Luther Rice is without question a shining example of mission fervor and devotion among Baptists. His passion for supporting Judson and others knew no bounds. His tireless efforts to unify Baptists in a common cause remain a tremendous model. Yet in 1826, Rice discovered that even he was susceptible to unwise actions when given broad, if unspoken, authority.

¹⁶As cited in Porter Routh, *Chosen For Leadership* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1976), 109.

¹⁷Keathley and Harsch, 4. Their citation came from Charles Kelley, *The Baptist Way: A Personal Perspective*, 2-3.

As McBeth carefully notes, Rice's alleged crime was not that of unscrupulous behavior, but rather a violation of the structures of authority. The structures in question then, are the same ones being debated in the present conflict. McBeth writes,

Rice was completely honest, but he often exceeded his authority. He purchased lands and erected buildings for Columbian College, all on notes or borrowed funds. . . . He further alienated powerful New England Baptists by . . . his plan to locate the central denominational offices and institutions in the South. The result was a painful and public investigation of the character and conduct of Rice.¹⁸

At the Fifth Triennial Meeting of the Baptist General Convention in New York in 1826, the committee assigned to investigate Rice brought the following report:

Mr. Rice, upon his own responsibility, and that of a few friends, purchased a piece of land in the vicinity of Washington for the purpose of erecting a College and Theological School, and forthwith commenced the building now standing. In the year 1820, he proposed the business to the Convention assembled in Philadelphia, and requested them to accept the premises and take the College. . . . This was accepted by the Convention under the condition that no debts should be contracted. . . . The injunction of the Convention not to increase the debt was so far disregarded . . . a debt of fearful amount was contracted. . . . Since that period, various transactions have been entered into by Mr. Rice in conjunction with the Board of Trustees of said College, some of which appear to your Committee to be exceedingly imprudent. In all these transactions Mr. Rice seems to have been the acting man, but not to have done any thing without the final sanction of the Board. . . . Your Committee view these transactions as great indiscretions, and although the Board of Trustees gave their sanction to them, yet as it was at the instance of Mr. Rice, he is, in our estimation, highly reprehensible.¹⁹

Although the charges and findings were quite harsh, the Committee concluded that Rice was not acting out of criminal intent. They concluded: "(we) take pleasure in stating that (we) see nothing like corruption, or selfish design; and although he has fallen into imprudences of very distressing

¹⁸McBeth, 212.

¹⁹Lucius Bolles, Chairman, *Proceedings of the Fifth Triennial Meeting of the Baptist General Convention, 1826*, as cited in McBeth, 213-214.

tendency, he does not seem to have had any other object in view than the prosperity of the College.”²⁰

Is there a parallel to the present situation found in the trail of Luther Rice? Perhaps it can be seen precisely in what was *not* criminal, nor a violation of Baptist tenets. Rice acted with the full knowledge of the Board of Trustees of Columbian College. His motivations were found to be pure. However, he *did* go expressly against the stated parameters of the 1820 Triennial Convention. He did so because he *could*. Luther Rice was the Traveling Agent of the Triennial Convention. His powers were so broad he was able to work across the lines of distinct entities and institutions within the Convention. He worked in indigenous missions as well as foreign missions. He led the chartering of a theological institution and also spoke as an agent for the Convention. Although Rice was exonerated of all charges, McBeth makes the point that, “after 1826, Rice’s influence in the denomination continued to diminish.”²¹ The reason for his lessening influence was the appearance of impropriety. Whenever anyone is given such broad powers as to transcend clear lines of demarcation between individual entities, even the noblest of efforts will become suspect.

In our opinion, no one within the Southern Baptist Convention should be given the ability to adjudicate across the checks and balances of individual boards of trustees. The “sole ownership” of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary by the Southern Baptist Convention gives the Executive Committee such rights, at least hypothetically. Even if the Executive Committee takes great pains *not* to exert such authority, the damage has still been done. A hierarchical structure and authority, against the autonomy of individual boards of trustees

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid., 212.

directly linked to the local churches, gives the appearance of impropriety. Even the purest and noblest of actions will become suspect.

Conclusion

In his 1960 Presidential address to the Southern Baptist Convention, Dr. Ramsey Pollard made a direct reference to the limited powers of the Executive Committee:

We do not assemble to tell the local churches what to do. We do not come to tell the rest of the world what to do. We come here to express our own thinking and our own judgment. The president of this Convention has no authority to speak for the Convention. The *Executive Committee* has no authority over any local church on the face of God's green earth, and neither does the Southern Baptist Convention. I think we need to emphasize that. There is always the danger of centralization.²²

Although Pollard was addressing the relationship between the Executive Committee and the local churches, the same can be suggested in this conflict. Dr. Jerry Vines seems to draw the same parallel in his address to the messengers of the 1989 Southern Baptist Convention:

The denomination exists for the churches, not the churches for the denomination. The denomination answers to the churches, not the churches to the denomination. The seat of Southern Baptist authority is the local church. That is where denominational power lies. Article 4 of our Constitution says: "While independent and sovereign in its own sphere, the Convention does not claim and will never attempt to exercise any authority over any other Baptist body."²³

Could Article 4 be speaking of the interagency relationships with the Convention, as well as the Convention's relationship to the churches? At the very least, one finds a clear statement of the supremacy of the local Southern Baptist churches over the institutions that serve them.

From an historical perspective, Southern Baptists have established a strong tradition of the centrality of the local church. Any system that violates the linkage of the SBC agency to the local church through the trustee system is a violation of Baptist polity itself. In both the

²²Caner and Caner, *Sacred Desk*, 198. Emphasis added.

²³*Ibid.*, 304.

Constitution and the Convention By-Laws, stringent parameters are required for all powers of, and interaction between, the various agencies of the Convention. Even in the inaugural divergent locations of the Foreign Mission Board and the Domestic Mission Board bespeaks disdain for any centralized authority over the cooperating churches. In the present conflict between the Executive Committee and the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, Baptist history is clearly on the side of the Seminary and the position of its president. Any break in that direct line, regardless of how strategic or convenient, transgresses the autonomy of the local church, and thus Baptist polity itself.

Therefore, the clearest resolution to the controversy would be to poll the voices of the churches. At the April 2004 meeting of the trustees of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, they voted to do exactly that. “The trustees will ask the (2005) messengers to decide between making the denomination the ‘sole member’ of the institution’s corporation or asserting the convention’s ownership through another, yet-to-be-determined legal means.”²⁴ In light of the historical affinity Baptists have held for local church autonomy, this is perhaps the wisest move possible.

²⁴Lact Thompson and Robert Marcus, “Appeal to Messengers” in *The Religious Herald*, 29 April 2004: 5.