

**A Program of Cooperation:
A Rejoinder to David Hankins'**

The Relation of the Southern Baptist Convention to Its Entities

Ken Keathley

Assistant Professor of Theology

Lloyd Harsch

Assistant Professor of Church History

When the staff of the Executive Committee requested the trustees of the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary to make the Southern Baptist Convention the sole member of the seminary's corporation, the trustees requested the help of Dr. Charles Kelley, president of the seminary, with their deliberations. He responded by preparing for them a paper entitled, *The Baptist Way: A Personal Perspective*.¹

The position taken by *The Baptist Way* can be summed up as follows. The entities of the Southern Baptist Convention enjoy organizational separation from one other within the unified whole. Such diversity within the unity arises out of a Baptist conviction and practice that opposes any type of denominational hierarchy. Kelley's concern with the adoption of sole membership is that it seems to set the stage for a type of connectionalism among the entities that could result in some future Executive Committee usurping the authority that rightfully belongs only to the Convention. Based upon their thorough investigation of the matter, at the regular fall meeting in October 2003, the trustees of NOBTS declined to implement sole membership.

Dr. David Hankins, vice president for Cooperative Program for the Executive Committee, wrote a reply to Kelley's paper entitled *The Relation of the Southern Baptist Convention to Its Entities: A Response to Charles Kelley's The Baptist Way*.² Hankins wrote at the behest of Dr. Morris Chapman, CEO of the Executive Committee, who states that he asked Hankins to answer Kelley's claim that the SBC entities are organizationally autonomous "in relation to their parent, the Southern Baptist Convention" (emphasis mine).³ Since Chapman's request contains a serious misstatement of Kelley's position, it may help to explain why Hankins' reply goes so far awry.

Hankins contends, contrary to Kelley's paper, that Southern Baptists favor "efficient centralization," that the Convention has always intended for its entities "to be subject to that centralization," and that sole membership poses no threat to Baptist polity.⁴

The authors of this rejoinder are convinced that Hankins, like Kelley, desires only what is best for the Southern Baptist Convention, and he writes from the perspective of one who submits to Christ's Lordship and His inerrant Word. However, there are positions in the Hankins' paper that must be addressed.

¹From here on referred to as *The Baptist Way*.

²From here on referred to as *A Response*.

³Morris Chapman, to the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary Trustees, 16 December 2003, p. 3.

⁴Hankins, 2.

Criticisms Directed at Kelley's Paper, *The Baptist Way*

Hankins and others have directed a number of criticisms toward Kelley's paper, three of which can be dealt with up front. The other objections Hankins makes about *The Baptist Way* will also be evaluated during the discussion of the Hankins' paper.

First, Hankins contends that Kelley raises concerns about a potential problem while ignoring the immediate problem.

Kelley argues that the risk of the formation of a leadership hierarchy resulting from the adoption of sole membership is at least as great as the risk of an attempt by any entity head to take the entity out of the Convention.⁵ Hankins describes Kelley's point as "strange" considering the number of state entities that recently have disassociated themselves from their respective state conventions.⁶

Hankins argues that sole membership provides a solution for an immediate reality. The trustees of a number of state convention entities have violated the trust given them by working to remove their respective entities out of state convention control. They maneuvered this action despite the fact that, in many instances, their charters forbade such an action. Sole membership appears to be an effective way of insuring that a similar action can never be taken by the trustees of a SBC entity.

Conversely, Kelley's concerns focus on the long term effects of sole membership. He reminds his readers to beware of the law of unintended consequences. Kelley has acknowledged that further steps would be required before some of the scenarios he posits could happen. For now, the trustees of the institutions that have adopted sole membership seem to be able to continue fulfilling their obligations freely. However, Kelley cites a report that illustrates how this freedom may be more tenuous than might appear. An editorial in a state paper told of a meeting between a committee from the Executive Committee and officials of Midwestern Seminary. The committee informed the MBTS officials of projected plans to close the institution. When the MBTS officials pointed out that the seminary's trustees might not agree with such a recommendation from the Executive Committee, the Executive Committee group suggested that the MBTS trustees might be replaced.⁷

⁵Kelley, 13.

⁶Hankins, 13. Kelley demonstrates in his paper that comparing the situations at the state level and the national level is like comparing apples and oranges, but unfortunately, many like Hankins see only the apples.

⁷Kelley, citing *The Pathway*, July 29, 2003, p. 4-5.

Hankins points out that the Convention has always had the authority to remove the trustees of any of its entities.⁸ But to argue that the statement made to the Midwestern officials was technically correct misses the point. The problem is that some on the *ad hoc* committee saw and verbally suggested trustee removal as a ready solution. Kelley does not question the statement's accuracy—but its purpose. The assertion seems intimidating and coercive. The point made in *The Baptist Way* is that sole membership could speed up the trustee removal process and that some appear to be too comfortable with that prospect.

Second, Hankins criticizes Kelley's paper, *The Baptist Way*, for a lack of documentation.

Hankins criticizes Kelley's paper for not citing more sources to verify some of his assertions. In Kelley's defense, he was writing an essay rather than a scholarly paper, and in fact he clearly labels the essay "a personal reflection." Nevertheless, as this paper will affirm, much of the opinion about Baptist polity expressed by Kelley is held in general by the Baptist community at large. It is difficult to find a Baptist scholar willing to advocate the position that Southern Baptists have had few qualms about denominational centralization and consolidation of power—a position suggested by Hankins.

Third, Kelley is criticized for not addressing why the other entities have been comfortable with adopting sole membership.

Kelley is chastened for not answering the question, "If sole membership is so theologically and practically disastrous, why is New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary the only institution raising objections?" However, leaders of some of the entities are continuing to look at the question and are now expressing reservations about their decisions—a fact that goes a long way towards answering this objection.

Despite objections such as these, Kelley seems to give a much more accurate description of Baptist polity and practice than does Hankins. *The Baptist Way* raises genuine doctrinal concerns about the actions recommended by the Executive Committee staff. The problems associated with *A Response* are much greater than the perceived shortcomings of *The Baptist Way*, based on the following evaluation of Hankins' paper.

⁸Hankins, 16, endnote 4.

An Evaluation of Hankins' Paper, *A Response*

First, does Hankins' paper correctly understand the premise of Kelley's paper?

The first and foremost problem with *A Response* is its misrepresentation of the thesis of *The Baptist Way*. Hankins seems to have misread Kelley's premise, and this error sets his paper on a tangent. He criticizes Kelley for holding that the entities have the same autonomous relationship with the SBC that affiliated churches have with the Convention and with each other. To make his case, he quotes Kelley's statement that the "approach is derived from and related to the organizational autonomy of local churches and conventions but differs in some ways."⁹ Note the last phrase of Kelley's sentence, "*but differs in some ways,*" which Hankins seems to ignore. Kelley goes to some length to explain what he perceives those differences to be. The entities have a similar relationship within the SBC in the sense that, just as no one Baptist church can exert authority over another Baptist church, so no one entity can exert authority over another entity (i.e., the Executive Committee over the IMB, for example). The relationship is different in the sense that the denominational entities are beholden to the SBC in a way that local churches are not.

Kelley does not argue that the entities are organizationally autonomous from the SBC. He reiterates his affirmation that SBC-elected trustees manifest the Convention's "decisive influence," and they are to operate within the "context of convention-controlled parameters." 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.¹⁰ He does not contend a SBC entity is free from the Convention but rather it is free from undue pressure from any other entity or its staff. For example, Kelley has repeatedly stated that if the SBC were to request New Orleans Seminary to adopt sole membership, then, with regrets, he would recommend that the trustee board comply. Even though Hankins quotes Kelley's qualifier that the organizational autonomy of the entities differ in some ways from that of local churches, he seems to ignore the importance of that qualifier. Because Hankins misreads *The Baptist Way*, he rebuts an argument that Kelley never makes.

Second, does Hankins' paper concede the major point of Kelley's argument?

In *The Baptist Way*, Kelley expresses the concern that adopting sole membership could be a step that might result in the Executive Committee exerting some level of control over the other entities. He recognizes that the decision would not be a big step, but the move would be a real

⁹Hankins, 2 quoting Kelley, 2.

¹⁰Kelley, 2-3.

one none the less. Kelley warns that this incipient connectionalism could lead to a greater centralization of power which would be vested, for all practical matters, within the Executive Committee.

Remarkably, Hankins does not contest Kelley's argument. Rather, he asserts that Southern Baptists are quite comfortable with a centralized system of denominational polity. Grasping the significance of this concession is crucial to understanding the issues at stake. Regardless of whom the reader may consider to be on the right side of this debate, one must note that Hankins agrees with Kelley's point that adopting sole membership moves the entities toward greater consolidation. Unlike Kelley, Hankins thinks centralization is a good idea.

Third, do Southern Baptists embrace centralization or do they favor cooperation?

Hankins argues that, unlike Northern Baptists with their societal methods and Landmark Baptists with their rejection of associational methods, Southern Baptists have historically embraced centralization as an effective means of inter-church ministry. He repeatedly claims that there "is no record of undue fear of centralization or creeping connectionalism or any other threat to Baptist polity."¹¹ In his summary of findings, Hankins lists first that the "Southern Baptist Convention, rather than fearing centralization, organized itself with a centralized structure."¹² The problem with this argument is that it seems to confuse cooperation with centralization. While Southern Baptists have continually explored avenues of greater efficiency through broader cooperation, they have intentionally avoided centralization.¹³

Organized in 1845, the Southern Baptist Convention adopted William B. Johnson's vision of a single organization that could coordinate the work of several ministry entities. Initially this plan consisted of only foreign and home mission endeavors, with more entities added at the Convention's pleasure. Article V of the Constitution adopted in Augusta provides for an expanded Convention and describes the relationship of the SBC's entities to the Convention as well as to each other.

To each Board shall be committed, during the recess of the Convention, the entire management of all the affairs relating to the object with whose interest shall be charged, all which management shall be in strict accordance with the

¹¹Hankins, 9.

¹²Ibid., 11.

¹³James L. Sullivan, *Rope of Sand with Strength of Steel: How Southern Baptists Function—and Why* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1974), 49-51. This is an in-depth study of Southern Baptist polity and practice.

constitutional provisions adopted by this Convention, and such other instructions as may be given from time to time.¹⁴

Each of the entities is to be independent of the others (i.e., organizational autonomy or separation) yet under the authority of the Convention. Each entity has an autonomous responsibility to fulfill its mission statement according to Convention boundaries.¹⁵ The Convention emphasized the separate nature of each entity by choosing to place the location of each board in different states.¹⁶ Had the founders of the Southern Baptist Convention desired greater centralization, they would have located the boards in the same place.

Southern Baptists have manifested a deep commitment to cooperative efforts while simultaneously rejecting the centralization of a consolidated denominational polity. Just like their Northern and Landmark brethren, Southern Baptists believe in the authority and autonomy of the local church. Like them, Southern Baptists are suspicious of a centralized denominational structure, fearing that such a structure would result in diminished authority of the local churches over its entities and a lack of accountability of the entities to the local churches. However, unlike their more contrary brethren, Southern Baptists believe that the task of the Great Commission is best accomplished with a cooperation done without compromising Baptist convictions. They obviously believe that the benefits of effective cooperation would be worth the additional vigilance necessary to stave off any creeping tendency towards centralization. Cooperation is not synonymous with centralization. For example, Hankins himself holds this title at the Executive Committee: vice president of *Cooperative* Program, not *Centralized* Program.

Fourth, is the Southern Baptist Convention a denomination in the traditional sense?

In his paper, Hankins overlooks the differences between the Southern Baptist Convention and other denominations. Rather than comparing the SBC with only anti-convention advocates (i.e., Landmarkists, Campbellites, Gospel Missioners, etc.), the paper perhaps would have been more balanced if comparisons had also been made with truly centralized denominations (i.e., United Methodists, Episcopalians, Roman Catholics, etc.). Southern Baptists are not simply Presbyterians who “dunk.” Baptist polity does not cede the authority of and the accountability to the local congregation to a ruling board at any level—local, associational, state, or national.

Hankins’ *A Response* minimizes historic Baptist antipathy to denominationalism as traditionally defined. There are reasons why Southern Baptists call themselves a *convention* rather than a *denomination*. For years SBC literature was reticent to use the label of denomination when

¹⁴*Proceedings of the Southern Baptist Convention*, 1845:3-4.

¹⁵Denominational literature and documents since that time have sometimes used the term “agency rights” when speaking of this organizational autonomy.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 14. See also Sullivan, 105.

describing the Convention. Baptist commitment to the diffusion of power can be seen geographically: its twelve entities are located in nine different states. The national convention has no binding authority over the state conventions; the states in turn are powerless over the associations. Unlike denominations such as the Assemblies of God and others, local churches of the SBC ordain and discipline their ministers, not the denominational infrastructures.

Fifth, is Hankins correct when he portrays sole membership as merely a legal issue?

According to Hankins, when Kelley objected to sole membership on the grounds of Baptist polity, he committed a categorical fallacy. Hankins contends, “Sole membership is a fundamentally legal solution to a fundamentally legal problem. Sole membership has no *prima facie* bearing on issues of polity.”¹⁷

When the Executive Committee in 1923 defined the working relationship between the Southern Baptist Convention and the respective State Conventions, the entity concluded with some enlightening remarks on this issue.

Among Baptists moral and spiritual rights and obligations are mutual. Only confusion can result from a failure to recognize the mutuality of these relations. We co-operate, not by coercion, but by mutual consent. Free conference and frank discussion enable us to reach satisfactory conclusions for co-operative work. We must never convert moral and spiritual into legal relations among Baptist general bodies.¹⁸

Sullivan describes this relationship as a “rope of sand with strength of steel.”¹⁹ Legal issues can often have doctrinal ramifications. Plus, as the 1923 Executive Committee admonishes, the relationships among Baptist entities must never be reduced merely to legalities.

Sixth, does Hankins’ paper correctly interpret the history of the SBC to its entities?

Hankins contends that the arguments presented by Kelley in *The Baptist Way* “do not bear up under the weight of Baptist history, theology and polity.”²⁰ He devotes a major portion of *A Response* to argue that Baptist history teaches the exact opposite. Rather than showing an

¹⁷Hankins, 2.

¹⁸*Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention*, 1923: 74.

¹⁹For an in-depth study of his views on the subject see James L. Sullivan, *Rope of Sand with Strength of Steel: How Southern Baptists Function and Why* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1974).

²⁰Hankins, 2.

aversion to centralization, Hankins maintains that a study of the history of the formation of the Southern Baptist boards reveals a gradual and persistent trend to centralization. He claims that this movement to centralization was hindered only by pragmatic social concerns and the political interests of the entity heads.²¹ However, a brief examination of the Baptist historical events he recounts will call his interpretation into question. Of course, as always, there were those who argued for greater consolidation and centralization, but their views did not carry the day. Plus—and this point is important for the present discussion—their positions were soundly defeated for polity's sake and not just political reasons.

The motion to consolidate the boards in 1880:

A Response states that in 1880 when Southern Baptists discussed the viability of the struggling Home Mission Board and considered a motion to consolidate the boards it was for the purpose of improving efficiency and economy.²² However, Hankins fails to give the historical context for the debate. The devastation of the Civil War, the challenges of reconstruction, and the pressures of the economic depression of the 1870s took their toll on contributions to the Home Mission Board. The Northern Baptists' Home Mission Society gained a greater presence in the South during this time. Some suggested that the Home Mission Board forge closer ties with the Home Mission Society. Others favored its consolidation with the Foreign Mission Board. In the end, Southern Baptists chose to retain their own home mission endeavor, which then recovered fully under the leadership of Isaac T. Tichenor.²³

After noting the failed attempt to consolidate the Boards at the annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1880, Hankins presents his supposition that this unsuccessful consolidation was a result of how the boards functioned.²⁴ He does not substantiate any relationship between how the boards functioned and a desire for consolidation. Closer scrutiny of the historical record shows that these discussions centered on the viability and survivability of the Home Mission Board, not on a desire for greater centralization.

The compromise recommendation made by the Efficiency Committee:

As the denomination grew, the need for broader cooperation resurfaced. The Committee on Efficiency was formed in 1913 to explore ways of increasing the effectiveness of the Convention.²⁵ It presented a lengthy report the following year and concluded its work in 1915.

²¹Ibid., 9.

²²Ibid., 6-7.

²³Jesse C. Fletcher, *The Southern Baptist Convention: A Sesquicentennial History* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 79-81, 92-94.

²⁴Hankins, 6-7.

²⁵*Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention*, 1913: 69-70.

The Commission recommended that the Convention boards not consolidate at that time.²⁶ In describing the situation Hankins correctly notes that,

The constitutional authority of the Convention over the entities was affirmed but the entities of the Convention were to maintain their separate boards. Processes were implemented which would insure the entities would maintain a high level of coordination and accountability to the churches through the Convention.²⁷

This point is exactly the one made by Kelley.

Wolfe's Consolidation Committee:

Beginning in 1916, M. H. Wolfe, a Baptist from Dallas, Texas, began pushing for greater consolidation. Hankins presents the efforts of Wolfe as evidence that early Southern Baptists were at least comfortable with a centralized denominational structure and did not perceive such a configuration as a threat to Baptist polity.²⁸ He claims,

In fact, it could be argued, except for the resistance of the entity leaders, the 'consolidation' view of the early 1900's may have prevailed. As it turned out, it was concern for harmony and the crisis of World War I (not potential polity violations) that swayed the Convention to continue the separate boards for the time.²⁹

However, Wolfe's position did not lose just because of social and political reasons. It was defeated because it was considered to be contrary to Baptist convictions.

Wolfe's resolution called for the creation of "one strong Executive Board which shall direct all the work and enterprises fostered and promoted by this Convention."³⁰ He was then named chair of the Consolidation Committee which studied the resolution. Another committee member, J. F. Brownlow, of Columbia, Tennessee, expressed his opinions in a remarkable article printed in the *Baptist Standard*:

The plan is very simple and will furnish a working unit for our present scattered energy, and will simplify to the fullest and joined together all the machinery of our denominational work and without the loss of a single department. It will bring about centralization, conservation and organization of all our scattered unit and

²⁶*Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention*, 1914: 69-78; 1915: 23.

²⁷Hankins, 7.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 8.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 9.

³⁰*Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention*, 1916: 18.

energy into a mighty dynamo, capable of sending out all over our field of work the greatest possible current of intelligence, heartening the worker and contributor alike.

First of all, it is democratic and framed somewhat after the order of the working organization of our National Government at Washington. Had you thought about it, our National Government is the largest organization of any business we know, and it has one essential to every successful business organization under the sun – one-mind-over-all.

Notwithstanding this well-settled and established fundamental in all human endeavor, large or small, our denominational leaders argue against it and term it centralization of power. The plan proposed will add to our organized work this great essential, and I deem it unnecessary to argue the importance of this, for everyone interested in the subject has only to analyze the relation of the President of the United States as the one-mind-over-all, sustains to the whole, or the president of any corporation as the one-mind-over-all as to that matter, to understand what I mean.³¹

Hankins is right to say that there were voices that called for consolidation, but he fails to note the radical nature of those voices and to be clear on their defeat by grass-roots Southern Baptists. Also, Hankins is wrong to say that there was no fear then of “centralization of power” any more than he could sustain the premise that there is now no fear among present-day Southern Baptists of centralization of power.

Later in the aforementioned article Brownlow declares, “Next in importance, is the consolidation of our scattered offices at Richmond, Atlanta and Nashville into one official staff, under one roof, where they would have the benefit of united council.” He concludes with the bold statement, “That the Boards should be consolidated, I have no doubt.”³² Kelley believes it fortunate that this view did not prevail among the Committee. One would gather from Hankins’s paper that he demurs that it should have prevailed.

In its 1917 report, the Committee recommended that “the Boards of the Convention remain separate as at present” but also recommended the formation of an Executive Committee to act on behalf of the Convention in between sessions and to serve in an advisory capacity among the Boards. While this expression of Southern Baptists indicated continuing willingness for broader cooperation, it clearly demonstrates their aversion to centralization and consolidation. James L. Sullivan cogently observes:

³¹J. F. Brownlow, “On Consolidating the Boards,” *Baptist Standard*, 25 January 1917, 4 and 22.

³²*Ibid.*, 23.

Our forefathers set up safeguards so we could not gravitate toward centralization. An illustration of this is that there is no executive *board* (his emphasis) in the Southern Baptist Convention. Our forefathers feared such a board at this level because this is the only place in the denomination where a hierarchical structure could evolve.³³

Kelley's views about the relative autonomy of the entities from the direct control of the Executive Committee are more in keeping with the concerns of our forefathers than Hankins seems willing to admit.

The decision to deed all entity property to the SBC:

In his survey of Baptist history Hankins does not include what Wolfe and Brownlow led the SBC to do next. Although the omission is a glaring one, perhaps Hankins made his decision in the interest of brevity. Nevertheless, the subsequent action is significant. Brownlow made a request, which the Convention granted, for the formation of a Committee on the Legal Status of the Boards to study the relationship of the Convention to its entities.³⁴ The committee, on which both Wolfe and Brownlow served, issued a final report in 1919, which read in part as follows:

We recommend that the title to all property, both real and personal, now vested in the several Boards of the Convention, be transferred to the Southern Baptist Convention, Incorporated.³⁵

The Convention adopted the report! However, implementation of this directive proved difficult. The Boards reported in 1920 that practical issues and legal difficulties had delayed their compliance.³⁶ The Foreign Mission Board, Home Mission Board, Sunday School Board, and the newly created Education Board requested that the issue receive further consideration.

In its report, the Education Board presented its study "whereby properties may be safeguarded to the denomination and the most helpful denomination relations sustained." The Board then presented three recommendations, the second of which has bearing on the matter at hand.

It is our judgment that the denomination should control its schools through small bodies such as boards or holding committees rather than attempt to do so by direct Convention control.³⁷

³³Sullivan, 49-50.

³⁴*Annual the Southern Baptist Convention*, 1917: 34-35.

³⁵*Annual the Southern Baptist Convention*, 1919: 61.

³⁶*Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention*, 1920: 44, 202, 377-79, 459-61, 527-28.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 527-28.

The Convention approved the action of the Boards and submitted the matter for continued study.³⁸

In 1921, the Convention reversed course with the following recommendations.

1. That the action of the Convention directing the Boards to transfer to the Convention titles to all properties be rescinded.
2. That the committee be directed to secure an amendment to the charter of this Convention based upon an enabling act of the legislature of Georgia, both clearly defined in the Convention's authority to function as now constituted, to carry on its business ad interim through the agency of Boards as now constituted and through any other board that may hereafter be created by the Convention.
3. That all the Boards secure charters, based upon enabling acts of the legislatures of their respective States, defining their relation to the Convention, authorizing them to act as the agents of the Convention and providing that all members of the several Boards shall be elected annually by the Convention.³⁹

As the *Religious Herald* reported, the Convention concluded that direct ownership by the Convention of its entities was *unwise and not appropriate for Southern Baptists* (emphasis added).⁴⁰ Just as the SBC rejected the extreme views of Wolfe and Brownlow then, so Southern Baptists should now seriously consider the ramifications of such a radical departure from the path of our forefathers who consistently resisted the call for centralization.

Seventh, has there been a concern historically among Southern Baptists about the power of the Executive Committee?

We agree wholeheartedly with Hankins' statement;

It is very important to make a distinction between the authority of the Executive Committee and the authority of the Southern Baptist Convention. Southern Baptists have made clear what the "checks and balances" are in this regard. The Executive Committee does not have centralized authority; the Southern Baptist Convention does. The

³⁸Ibid., 84.

³⁹*Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention*, 1921: 26.

⁴⁰*Religious Herald* (May 19, 1921), 3.

Executive Committee has not been assigned to supervise or control the entities of the Convention; the Southern Baptist convention does have direct control over the entities.⁴¹

Unfortunately, Hankins does not seem to acknowledge that through the years Southern Baptists have recognized the inherent risks of allowing the Executive Committee in general or its staff in particular to assume authority, whether inadvertently or purposefully, when that authority belongs only to the Convention.

With the Covenant for a New Century reorganization, issues of efficiency and coordination again were addressed. Boards and commissions were either dissolved or merged to provide for more effective ministry. Had centralization also been a desire of the convention, all boards would have been consolidated into one location. Reportedly there were individuals who called for such a consolidated board, eliminating dedicated boards of trustees to govern each entity. In this scenario, theological education would be consolidated into the hands of one individual or one central board that would try to oversee this endeavor across the Convention instead of 30-40 Baptists for each entity entrusted with its respective governance.

One constant has been the relationship of the Executive Committee to the entities of the Southern Baptist Convention. Southern Baptist Convention By-Laws have consistently and clearly defined that relationship. The current By-Laws state:

(9) To maintain open channels of communication between the Executive Committee and the trustees of the entities of the Convention, to study and make recommendations to entities concerning adjustments required by ministry statements or by established Convention policies and practices, and, whenever deemed advisable, to make recommendations to the Convention. *The Executive Committee shall not have authority to control or direct the several boards, entities, and institutions of the Convention. This is the responsibility of trustees elected by the Convention and accountable directly to the Convention* (emphasis added).⁴²

The Convention has consistently struck a balance between newer methods of coordination and cooperation over against consolidation and centralization. The Convention has at times in its history flirted briefly with consolidation and centralization, but in every instance until now, the SBC quickly reversed course when it recognized its error. The Convention recognized that entrusting greater power into fewer hands is not only unwise; it is not “the Baptist way.”

Sullivan notes that, “History seems to reveal a tendency toward gradual and perhaps unconscious gravitation toward centralization in Christian organizations unless there is constant effort to

⁴¹Hankins, 8.

⁴²“By-Laws,” Article 18, Section E, Subsection (9).

prevent it.⁴³ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the great Baptist pastor from a century ago, wrote, “The theory of one centralization of authority . . . is not that which was originally enjoined either by precept or practice in the New Testament Church.”⁴⁴ Southern Baptists would do well to heed these words of caution.

Contrary to Hankins’ claim that there is “no record of undue fear of centralization or creeping connectionalism,” there have been widespread statements of caution about this issue. For example, in 1921, Selsus E. Tull addressed this fear, noting that as Southern Baptists, “We have resorted to a scatteration of interests, divided between ‘Commissions’ and ‘Committees’ and ‘Boards,’ in order to avoid ‘centralization of power, . . .’”⁴⁵ SBC annuals also report expressions of concern on a number of occasions. In the 1970s the Convention appointed the Committee of Seven to study and evaluate the Executive Committee. The committee noted the power inherent in the Executive Committee by virtue of its office. It then warned:

Caution should be taken to prevent even an unconscious trend toward undue centralization of authority in Southern Baptist organizational life. The usurpation of undue authority by the Executive Committee over the agencies of the Convention would be disastrous.⁴⁶

Even more disastrous is the perception that the Executive Committee can be equated with the Southern Baptist Convention. The Committee of Seven noted that, “‘acting for the Convention ad interim’ is not the same as ‘being the Convention ad interim.’ There is a difference and it is regrettable to note the growing practice in recent years to refer to the Executive Committee as the Convention ad interim.”⁴⁷ It is distressing to hear Executive Committee and Southern Baptist Convention used interchangeably. It speaks to a confusion about where the true authority of Southern Baptist polity lies.

The *Religious Herald* voiced its concerns regarding a growing Convention, increasing influence of denominational entities, and decreased time during the Convention for adequate discussion.

It must be frankly admitted, however, that the real work of the Convention is no longer done by the Convention itself. It is practically impossible, with the present organization and methods, and in the physical conditions in which the Convention

⁴³James L. Sullivan, “Polity Developments in the Southern Baptist Convention (1900-1977),” *Baptist History in Heritage* 14.3 (July 1979): 26.

⁴⁴*Sword and the Trowel*, April 1865.

⁴⁵Selsus E. Tull, “Getting Down to Business in Baptist Affairs,” *Baptist Standard* 33.14 (April 7, 1921): 21.

⁴⁶*Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention*, 1976:47.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*

is frequently forced to meet, to deliberate about anything. So it has come to pass that debate is practically unknown and conference is out of the question. We are coming rapidly to the place, if we have not already reached it, when we must rely wholly upon the Boards and standing committees to do our thinking for us. This is to some extent both desirable and inevitable. At the same time we cannot suppress the conviction that it is not best for us, or for the interests which we seek to promote, that our great representative body should degenerate into a mere celebration, a place for set and formal reports and addresses, a sort of spectacular gathering, full of holy enthusiasm, it may be, but lacking utterly the deliberative element.⁴⁸

These words were written in 1909 when the Convention meeting extended across five days. The situation is even more acute with the Convention now in session for only two days and with limited time at the Convention for discussion. Messengers allow for two or three voices to be heard for a maximum of three minutes each before someone calls the question and a vote is taken.

Southern Baptists in generations past can teach us much. Southern Baptists have chosen to relate to their entities through decisive influence, connected by a rope of sand with the strength of steel. The connecting fiber of this rope is trust in the system and the churches that implemented this extraordinary plan of cooperation, not authoritarianism on the part of a centralized few.

The Southern Baptist Convention again clearly stated its position in 1997. Describing “the need to protect and defend the principles of Baptist theology concerning the church and evangelism on which the structure of the Southern Baptist Convention,” the Convention messengers declared:

The Southern Baptist Convention affirms the integrity of the historical governance and structure of the Southern Baptist Convention, including the authority of the board of trustees of each Southern Baptist Convention entity and the officers elected by such board to govern the affairs of the entity, noting that this structure has served Southern Baptists well for over 150 years and must be preserved.⁴⁹

This mandate should be recognized as the will of Southern Baptists, and actions taken by convention entities should be commensurate with this view until a point in time when Southern Baptists clearly express a different direction.

⁴⁸ “The Convention,” *Religious Herald* (May 20, 1909), 10.1, cited in Barnes, 172-73.

⁴⁹ *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention*, 1997:38.

Conclusion

Hankins contends that in *The Baptist Way*, Kelley presents a polity foreign to Southern Baptist theology, history, and practice. He argues that Southern Baptists have always embraced centralization for the purpose of efficiency. This rejoinder has demonstrated that Hankins misreads Kelley's premise; that Hankins concedes the point that sole membership could lead to greater centralization; and that in the process Hankins presents an incomplete, and thus incorrect, interpretation of Baptist history. Contrary to Hankins' assertions, Kelley's paper more closely captures the vision of how Baptists have done, are doing, and will be doing ministry until the Convention as a body changes that direction.

Kelley expresses the concern that sole membership could be a radioactive pellet that once swallowed will eventually do irreparable harm. He argues that the adopting of sole membership by SBC entities is a small but definite step away from historic Baptist polity. He warns that this action could unintentionally put the denomination on a trajectory toward connectionalism which, once started, might be inevitable. Is he correct? Since eleven of the twelve entities have already adopted sole membership, one could hope not.

In the Book of First Samuel, the Israelites became weary of the anarchy that often characterized the time of the Judges, and they demanded a king. The prophet Samuel warned that in their desire for the efficient and effective leadership a king could provide, the Israelites failed to appreciate the uniqueness of their situation and failed to consider the long term consequences of their proposed decision. Once a kingship was installed, it could not be rescinded; it could not be revoked. When someone like David sits on the throne, an aristocracy works fine. But when an Ahab ascends to power, the nation has no recourse.

Like the old prophet, Kelley has looked ahead and he is warning Southern Baptists that, in solving an immediate problem without careful thought and study of all options, they may be creating an even bigger quandary for the next generation. Baptists have seen at the state level in entities like Baylor, Windemere, and Shorter, what happens when a small number of unscrupulous men have power without accountability. *The Baptist Way* argues that adopting sole membership could set in motion a series of steps that would allow the same thing to happen at the national level. The writers of this rejoinder hope Kelley is wrong, but they believe his paper demonstrates that it is reasonable to consider and weigh the matter lest he be right.