

**The Baptist Way:
A Personal Perspective**

by
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This is a paper about Southern Baptist polity. Polity has to do with the way things work. It is a description of how and why Southern Baptists do the things they do in the way they do, including how they handle the relationships between the various kinds of Baptist bodies. The specific focus of the paper will be the relationship between Southern Baptists and their national entities. As heirs of the Conservative Resurgence, we must be careful to preserve both our Baptist theology and the way of doing church and ministry that has always characterized Southern Baptists as a people. Following a request from the staff of the SBC Executive Committee asking our Trustees to consider making the Southern Baptist Convention the sole member of the Seminary's corporation, our Trustees asked me to prepare this paper to assist in their deliberations. For reasons indicated in what follows, I feel it is a more complicated decision than some would think.

One disclaimer must be offered. The doctrine of the priesthood of believers is of crucial importance in the development of Baptist polity. Its influence is seen most clearly in the way things work at the local church level of Baptist life. To control the length of this paper, and with the hope of a paper to come on local church polity, this important doctrine and its implications will not be described and included in this paper. Necessity overcomes the writer's frustration at this omission, but let the reader be advised that no complete understanding of Southern Baptist polity is possible without an understanding of this Bible doctrine and its implications for the way Baptists do church. Also, the term Baptist refers to Southern Baptists unless otherwise noted.

The Baptist Identity

Historically three distinctive characteristics identify Southern Baptists: doctrinal agreement, cooperative missions, and autonomous organization. This paper is an explanation of autonomous organization. Autonomous organization means that there is no controlling external authority over Baptist churches and conventions but Christ and His Word, the Bible. No national or state convention controls any church or any other convention. No church controls any other church or any convention. No person controls any church or convention. Direct control resides in each individual body under the supreme authority of Christ and the Bible. Thus each local church and convention is alone responsible, legally and morally, for its actions and

decisions. Churches and conventions can make requests or recommendations to other churches or conventions, but they cannot require or direct action. This is the meaning of organizational autonomy for churches and conventions.

Through the years the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) gave birth to or adopted various entities to assist and facilitate the ministries of its local churches. The International Mission Board, North American Mission Board, and New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary are examples of entities created by direct action of the SBC. The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary are examples of entities created as independent ministries but later adopted by the SBC. In regard to its entities, the Convention is organized in a way unique among American denominations. The approach is derived from and related to the organizational autonomy of local churches and conventions but differs in some ways.

The Southern Baptist Convention put all of its entities on a level plane with no entity, from the Executive Committee to the Annuity Board, above or below any other entity. There is no pyramid of leadership in the SBC with a CEO at the top. In addition, the SBC chose to exercise its institutional ownership rights through **decisive influence** on the entities rather than **operational control** of the entities. The decisive influence of the denomination is established and maintained through **convention-elected Trustees** operating within the guidelines of a **convention-determined ministry assignment** and a **convention-determined business and financial plan**, in accordance with the parameters established in a **convention-approved charter** and funded by a **convention-endorsed budget**. As long as they stay within these SBC parameters, the duly elected Trustees of each entity exercise complete control and supervision of entity operations. They hire the entity president, approve his vision for the entity, oversee how the entity goes about fulfilling its SBC ministry assignment, and maintain the fiscal integrity of all entity operations.

Accountability to the Convention for the entity and its Trustees is maintained through annual ministry and financial reports made to the SBC, including a personal report from the president of each entity to the messengers comprising the annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention. This annual report includes a mandatory time for questions from the messengers.

The result is a high degree of organizational autonomy for the entities, **but within the context of SBC-controlled parameters**. As Trustees exercise their operational control of entity policies and ministries, they feel accountable not to human agency alone, but to Christ and Scripture as well. **Southern Baptists believe this is as close as we can get to a New Testament model**

incorporating our doctrinal convictions about the Lordship of Christ and the authority of Scripture into an organizational structure for the Convention and its entities.

In American church life this organizational approach is unusual. Southern Baptists differ from many other denominations for theological reasons. We avoid the more common leadership hierarchy in order to affirm with unmistakable clarity the supremacy of Christ and the Bible over all human authority, structures, and organizations. The entities have an SBC-assigned ministry, but each entity seeks a vision from the Lord on how to fulfill that ministry and feels accountable to the Lord for accomplishing that vision. Each entity knows it must operate within the guidelines established by the SBC, but each entity is also fully aware that its day-to-day operations must be in accordance with the teachings of the Bible. **The genius of Baptist polity is that it preserves in each entity a strong sense of Convention ownership and accountability as well as a strong sense of submission to God and guidance from His inspired, inerrant Word.**

Also reflected in this approach is our understanding of the doctrine of sin. Baptists believe that any one of us is capable of great sin. Unfortunately our past documents this doctrinal truth all too well. Many years ago the treasurer of the Home Mission Board embezzled nearly \$1,000,000 on the eve of the Great Depression. It created great problems for the whole SBC. **Knowing the corrupting influence power can have, Southern Baptists operate within a check and balance system that divides power into many segments.**

Each entity is responsible for its own ministry, but not for any other SBC ministry. There is no one person or board of Trustees in charge of everything for the Convention, lest there be a temptation for one person or board to control the agenda of the Convention. For example, although we have six seminaries, each one has a separate president and board of Trustees, and each one has a distinctive vision about how to prepare God-called Southern Baptists for the ministry. Thus no one person or board can control theological education in Southern Baptist life. Trustee terms of service for all entities are strictly limited so that every governing board has new members every year, and no board has “life” trustees. Even the location of SBC entities was a part of the check and balance system. Our twelve entities are located in nine different states, thus discouraging the development of a “headquarters” mentality among Southern Baptists.

This type of organization makes it very difficult for one person or group to control the Southern Baptist Convention or its various ministries. No Trustee

can serve on more than one SBC board at a time. The leader of one entity cannot occupy a leadership role in any other entity. If presidential or Trustee sin, bad decisions, or poor systems of operation create problems in one entity, the lack of centralized control connecting all the entities makes it less likely that the problems will spread to other entities. If any SBC leader has an agenda that is out of step with God's agenda or the needs of our churches, our polity makes it difficult for that leader to corrupt the agenda of other entities or the state conventions. **Southern Baptists have confidence in their leaders, but they have always resisted the centralization of power and the temptations that centralized power brings.**

The division of power and authority into many segments keeps the growth of the Convention and its entities from usurping the central role of the local church in Southern Baptist life. This is the third doctrinal concern affecting the relationship between Baptists and their national entities. **The center of Southern Baptist life is the local church, not the denomination. The Convention and its entities were created to facilitate, not replace, the ministry of local churches.** Whatever happens in Baptist life must reflect the significance of the local church if it is to be embraced by Baptist people.

The alternative to the Baptist approach of organizational autonomy is called connectionalism, with direct lines of authority and control connecting the bodies and entities within a denomination. If messengers to the SBC directly controlled the hiring and firing of entity presidents, missionaries, or seminary faculty members, that would be a connection of operational control and authority between the SBC and its entities. If a person or a small group of people was made responsible for overseeing the work of all entities-- their hiring and firing, their plans for ministry and so forth-- that would be a hierarchy of control connecting the entities with a chain of command, as opposed to each entity operating independently of the others within a framework of coordination and cooperation.

Throughout their history Southern Baptists rejected connectionalism and stood instead on the principle of organizational autonomy. They preferred their entities to operate out of **an individual sense of divine direction** on how to fulfill their respective ministry assignments in cooperation with other SBC entities and in accordance with SBC-established guidelines rather than operating from an agenda handed to them by a denominational hierarchy.

Organizational Autonomy Illustrated

The recent Conservative Resurgence¹ was a movement among SBC churches to pull their entities back from a drift to the left and anchor them firmly in historic Baptist theology. It provides perhaps the clearest “real life” illustration of organizational autonomy at work. Here is what happened. When the grassroots of SBC churches grew concerned about the theological direction of convention entities, a specific strategy to implement a course correction was undertaken. That strategy was not to gain control of one or more SBC annual sessions and so be able to instruct the entities to change. The strategy was to elect Trustees committed to historic Baptist doctrine to entity boards year by year and let those Trustees change the entities from the inside. Even when Conservatives began winning all the floor votes at the annual Conventions, the strategy did not change. Entity Trustees were elected in their normal rotation, which is the traditional way for the SBC to exercise its **decisive influence**, and those Trustees exercised their **operational control** to change the direction of the entities.

It took more than ten years, but the process worked. Conservatives did it the Baptist way. **The most profound and significant course correction in the history of American Christianity was not a hard and fast power play, but rather a long, slow application of Baptist polity by Baptist people working to address a Baptist problem in a Baptist way. It happened because of the passionate commitment of Southern Baptists to both their doctrinal convictions and their polity.** I believe that is why God blessed the movement with success and will secure its outcomes for many years to come.

Some Baptists may remember a day when the term agency was used to describe the various ministries of the Southern Baptist Convention. In recent years the legal counsel for the SBC urged replacing the term “agency” with the term “entity” because agency implied the boards, commissions, and schools of the SBC were acting as agents under the direct control of the Convention, perhaps making the SBC liable for problems in any of those ministries. Entity, on the other hand denoted the looser relationship of decisive influence, but not operational control.

According to traditional Baptist polity, entity is indeed a better word than agency. Whenever the SBC has been named in a lawsuit stemming from a situation

¹Conservative Resurgence is the term commonly used to describe the successful effort to pull SBC entities back from a drift towards the theological left and anchor them firmly in historic Baptist theology. It began in 1979, and is widely judged to have accomplished its goals by 1991. For further information see *The Southern Baptist Reformation* by Jerry Sutton.

involving one of its entities, the legal strategy of the SBC has been to show the court that according to Baptist polity the SBC does not have direct control of the actions of its entities and therefore is not liable for problems created by the entities. Furthermore, the SBC insists it has no control over the actions of local Baptist churches or other conventions and therefore cannot be liable for any actions of local churches or state conventions.

This is our legal strategy because it is the truth about the relationship between the SBC, its entities, local churches, and other Baptist bodies. While the SBC has decisive influence, entity Trustees have direct control of the entity and thus legal responsibility for its actions. The Southern Baptist Convention exercises its ownership rights through its unquestioned right to elect all entity Trustees and to approve or disapprove any changes in entity charters. The Trustees of each entity have operational control over how the entity goes about fulfilling its ministry assignment, but always in accordance with SBC guidelines. As an SBC seminary we are an entity, not an agency, of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Requirements of Organizational Autonomy

Whenever parents give birth to a child, they know it means assuming at least two responsibilities: oversight and provision. Every child will need some degree of supervision, and every child will need food, clothing, shelter, etc. There may be other needs along the way, and children may still have problems even if those two basic needs are well met. If children do not have those two needs addressed, however, they cannot avoid serious problems. Since the SBC, in order to emphasize the supremacy of Christ and His Word, to accept the reality of sin, and to affirm the centrality of the local church, chose organizational autonomy as its operating philosophy, two requirements are necessary to maintain a heart connection between the Convention and its entities: oversight and provision.

Primary responsibility for institutional oversight goes to the Trustees selected by the Southern Baptist Convention for each entity board. Maintaining the decisive influence of the SBC on its entities in perpetuity thus requires a vigilant process of Trustee selection that consistently produces entity Trustees who are committed to maintaining SBC parameters as a sacred trust. Before the Conservative Resurgence the Convention appeared to give less and less attention to the election of entity Trustees. The attitude of Trustee candidates toward historic Baptist doctrine was rarely questioned. Their commitment to uphold the significance and validity of SBC influence was assumed. The result: some entities began to drift from their moorings in our Southern Baptist heritage. In response the Conservative Resurgence focused the attention of Southern Baptists on the Trustee selection process. Why? Insure the integrity of the Trustee

selection process, and you insure the decisive influence of the SBC on its entities. Fail to be vigilant in the Trustee selection process, and you create the potential for problems.

The provision of adequate resources for an entity to accomplish its ministry assignment is also a major factor in the heart connection of Southern Baptists with their entities. The Cooperative Program (CP) and the two national mission offerings are a wonder of the religious world. They have provided systematic support for all entities except the Annuity Board and Lifeway Christian Resources, which get their operating budgets from the sale of products and services. Since most of their customers are Southern Baptist churches, members, and ministers, however, even the Annuity Board and Lifeway have a strong economic tie to the denomination. The other ten entities could not function without Cooperative Program funds and the mission offerings. This financial provision is vital in keeping the relationship of the SBC entities and the Convention a heart relationship of mutual benefit. Through the ministries of its entities Southern Baptist churches of any size are able to have a worldwide mission and influence. Through the financial support of CP and the mission offerings, the SBC entities have fiscal stability and the opportunity for growth.

When these two requirements are adequately addressed and attended to over time, the relationship of the SBC and its entities works smoothly and harmoniously. When one of the two is neglected there is the potential for problems. When both requirements are neglected, problems are likely. The relationship between the SBC and its entities during the Conservative Resurgence is an illustration of the first scenario. The relationship between some state conventions and their Baptist colleges illustrate the latter scenario.

The Conservative Resurgence was the result of a broad cross-section of Southern Baptists becoming concerned about theological drift within many of the entities. For more than a decade, as the movement unfolded, nearly every entity head, many former SBC leaders, and most of the state Baptist papers bitterly opposed what was being done. While many, many SBC churches were quite concerned about the theological direction SBC entities were moving, most of that era's Convention leaders supported the leftward drift and worked hard to derail this grassroots movement. During all the years of conflict, however, there never was an attempt by those who opposed the Conservative Resurgence, to end the decisive influence of the SBC on any of the entities. It was never mentioned because it was impossible. None of the entities could have survived without CP, the mission offerings, and the goodwill of SBC churches.

The weakness created by a complacent attitude toward Trustee selection was

offset by the strength of the financial investment Southern Baptists were making in their entities. The Cooperative Program held the system together while the reformation of Trustee replacement unfolded and took root. Now, with a reinvigorated Trustee selection process in place, it would be very, very difficult for an entity to consider changing its relationship with the Convention, even if Cooperative Program support weakened. A careful Trustee selection process and Southern Baptist financial support are the check and balance system that makes organizational autonomy work effectively.

Some state conventions faced a different landscape. They, too, had a relationship of organizational autonomy with colleges they created. Unlike the SBC, however, in some cases both of the requirements for a healthy heart connection between these state entities and state conventions in a context of organizational autonomy grew weak. The colleges played a stronger and stronger role in selecting their own Trustees, and the Cooperative Program was playing less and less of a role in the college operating budgets. The only glue holding some of the relationships together was the momentum of tradition and the ethical responsibility of the entities to abide by the clear language of their charters. When the leadership of colleges like Baylor, Wake Forest and Furman wanted to eliminate the possibility of decisive influence from the state convention, there was very little internal dissent from Trustees and no compelling financial basis to continue the relationship. The colleges chose to abandon their historic relationship with their state conventions and ignore the clear language of their charters. When Baptists across the state saw little internal dissent among Trustees on changing the relationship and so little of CP going to the colleges, they saw no reason to challenge the decision made by the colleges. Both oversight and provision, the two requirements for organizational autonomy, were weak, and significant problems resulted.

Organizational autonomy has served Southern Baptists well for more than a century. It is a tangible expression of our radical commitment to the supremacy of Christ and the Bible, a recognition of the problems sin can cause, and an affirmation of the centrality of the local church in Baptist life. Only very recently have any Baptist entities abused our historic polity for their own purposes, and then only state Baptist entities were involved. The different experiences of the Southern Baptist Convention and some state conventions illustrate how very important are the two requirements for organizational autonomy to function smoothly and effectively. There must be vigilance in the annual Trustee selection process to insure that a passionate commitment to the SBC or state convention and its right of decisive influence is a necessary qualification to serve as a Trustee of a Baptist institution. Care must also be taken, in so far as it is possible, for the Convention to remain an important source of provision for the

needs of the entities, through the Cooperative Program or some other means.

When both of these requirements are in place, the relationship between entities and their conventions will remain strong. If either one of these two requirements is overlooked, there is the potential for problems. If both of the requirements are overlooked, eventual problems are probable, not just possible. **Vigilant oversight and adequate provision are essential for organizational autonomy to work.** The true risk of organizational autonomy is the risk of faithfulness to the requirements that make it work.

Sole Membership and Baptist Polity

As noted above, maintaining the principle of organizational autonomy in the relationships of our churches, conventions, and entities does carry with it an element of risk. Some state convention entities have ignored their ethical responsibilities to follow the established guidelines of their charters and attempted to eliminate the decisive influence of Southern Baptists in their state conventions. Court cases are now in progress to determine whether or not such actions are legal. Legal or not, in my opinion such actions appear to be gross violations of both Baptist polity and the ethics of commitment expected by Baptists of their leaders. It should also be noted that in each of the few cases in which this has happened, one or both, usually both, of the requirements of oversight and provision were weak at best.

The staff of the SBC Executive Committee, in an effort to prevent any national entities from ever taking such action, have asked each entity to name the Southern Baptist Convention as the sole member of its corporation, giving the Southern Baptist Convention direct legal control of every entity. The Executive Committee (EC) staff has said that the only purpose of this move as it relates to entity governance, is to make the rights of the Southern Baptist Convention to control Trustee election and charter changes indisputable. In all other ways, the EC staff has said, entity Trustees would continue to exercise operational control of entity affairs under the decisive influence of SBC guidelines. While I agree absolutely with the objective behind the recommendation, I have a profound problem with the proposed solution. To take such a step could start a fundamental change in historic Baptist polity and compromise our practice of organizational autonomy, one of the three major characteristics of our Baptist identity.

Why do I think sole membership could be a threat to our historic Baptist polity? Sole membership, particularly as it is defined by the state of Louisiana,

introduces connectionalism to the denominational structure in the place of the organizational autonomy which we have historically practiced and so beautifully illustrated during the Conservative Resurgence. It starts a movement away from **the decisive influence of the SBC** and towards **direct control by the SBC**. It is a small step away from duly elected SBC Trustees governing the institution in accordance with duly established SBC parameters, and a small step toward increasing the role of the denomination in direct entity governance. My problem is not the size of the step. My problem is the direction of the step.

A bigger problem also looms in my mind: rarely is the first step in a new direction the last step. Where will this new path stop? Human nature being what it is, it is quite possible that this new form of control will encourage an individual or group, intentionally or unintentionally, to attempt to exercise a higher level of central control over the entities. There are reasons why Southern Baptists have always taken human nature seriously.

As I was preparing the final draft of this paper, an editorial from *The Pathway*, official newsjournal of the Missouri Baptist Convention came across my desk. The editor told Missouri Baptists that a committee of the SBC Executive Committee recently considered closing or dramatically changing Midwestern Seminary. When asked what would be done if the Midwestern Trustees did not agree with the committee's suggestion, those who represented this committee said the Executive Committee would simply ask the Convention to replace the entire Midwestern Trustee Board with people who would agree with the suggestion(*The Pathway*, July 29, 2003, p4-5).

To my knowledge this stunning suggestion is unprecedented in Southern Baptist history. Knowing that Midwestern Seminary had already made the SBC the sole member of its corporation, these members of the SBC Executive Committee were assuming the power of sole membership made it possible to change an entire Board of Trustees at one Convention. Whether they were right or wrong in their interpretation, such a suggestion would not have been made prior to the sole membership strategy.

Contrast this with the strategy used during the Conservative Resurgence. At no point during the Conservative Resurgence, when the whole strategy for change was based upon changing entity Trustees, was any effort made to make sweeping changes on a Board with members who disagreed with SBC leadership. The change to sole membership suggests a new power would be in play at the denominational level. It is human nature to explore and test the limits of power. It took less than five years for the perception of sole membership as a new tool for controlling entities to surface. I believe it is impossible to say sole membership

would never be used for anything but its original stated purpose.

My biggest problem with sole membership is disappointment. Knowing that the primary theological issues behind our emphasis on organizational autonomy are a radical commitment to the supreme authority of Christ and His Word, the reality of human sin, and the centrality of the local church, it saddens me that biblical conservatives would be the group of record taking the first step toward connectionalism at the national level of SBC life. If Jesus tarries, one can almost hear the ironic comments of a future church historian looking back on this era in Southern Baptist life and noting that “After a long and passionate struggle to fill every SBC board with Trustees they trusted and every entity presidency with known conservatives, the heirs of the Conservative Resurgence exchanged the historic Baptist principle of a trustee-based organizational autonomy for a connectional polity that would tighten direct denominational control over the entities. Having seen God do a miracle once, Conservatives changed the rules lest they have to count on a miracle again.”

What About the Risks?

The decision of Baylor and a few other state Baptist entities to disregard a covenant commitment and end the decisive influence of the Baptist body that founded them or adopted and sustained them is indisputable evidence of the risks associated with organizational autonomy. If one does not feel sole membership of entity corporations is acceptable, what can one do about the risks involved?

First, some risks are better accepted than avoided. When God gave us the Ten Commandments, He was quite concise. The Sabbath commandment was simple. Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy. To that the Lord added just a bit of comment and elaboration. The Hebrew teachers were afraid people would not understand what God meant, and they kept adding more and more laws to help people know how to keep the Sabbath commandment and so minimize the risk of unintentional disobedience. The result was hundreds of ritual laws that made the Sabbath more of a burden than a help. Today it is easy for us to say they should not have added all of the additional laws. The risk that people would misunderstand the commandment as God gave it and disobey unintentionally was a risk worth taking.

Throughout our history the principle of organizational autonomy has been very important to Baptists because of the theology behind it. Our emphasis on autonomy has been one part of our witness to the supremacy of Christ and the

final authority of the Bible, the reality of human sin, and the centrality of the local church. Baptists must decide if continuing to bear that witness is worth the risk in today's world. **We must keep in mind that the true source of risk is not organizational autonomy. It has served us well for more than 150 years. The true source of risk is in whether or not we will be faithful to the requirements of organizational autonomy: vigilance in Trustee selection and adequate provision for the needs of the entities.** We could have a problem if we let one slide. We are likely to have a problem if we fail to attend to both issues. When Baptists have been faithful in both areas, there has never, ever been a problem. Will we accept the responsibility of being faithful ourselves and teaching the next generation to be faithful? Is continuing the polity practiced by Southern Baptists for more than a hundred and fifty years worth the risk of our faithfulness? I think so. **I prefer the risks of organizational autonomy to the risks of connectionalism.**

Second, explore other alternatives to sole membership. For instance, what could be done to improve the Trustee selection process so that all entities would have only Trustees with a deep commitment to uphold the decisive influence of the Southern Baptist Convention on the entities? Imagine asking each duly elected Trustee to sign a covenant with the SBC to uphold all SBC guidelines for the entity he or she will serve. Imagine that signing taking place during a commissioning service for all new Trustees that would be a feature of every Southern Baptist Convention. Steps such as these could be taken to give Trustees a strong sense of identity with the Convention and make it unlikely that the majority of any board would ever consider changing its relationship to the Convention.

Also, could we add to entity charters financial penalties for unauthorized charter changes, such as the immediate loss of CP and all other denominational funding? This kind of penalty could be set up for implementation as soon as an unauthorized change of charter or Trustees was made by an entity and would not require waiting for a vote of the Convention. The consequences of such actions would be immediate and would be a significant deterrent for ignoring SBC guidelines. For example, it would take at least one hundred fifty million dollars more endowment than we have now to replace the annual income we receive from the Cooperative Program.

These are just some possibilities. It is likely there are others. Southern Baptists have six seminaries that share a common mission and common doctrinal convictions. Yet the six seminaries have different approaches to fulfilling the same assigned mission and teaching the same Baptist doctrine. It is possible there are different ways for the entities to achieve this common objective of

maintaining in perpetuity their Southern Baptist identity.

Third, recognize the necessity of a continual effort to create an environment in which any change in the relationship between the SBC and its entities is unthinkable on the part of the entities, the SBC, or most importantly the people who form our churches. That is the bottom line. We can never stop working on keeping the relationship between the Convention and its entities healthy. There has never been an attempt to take an SBC entity away from the SBC. Does anyone think any conservative leader would do so today? The larger and more realistic question is how to maintain the present direction of the SBC and its entities. Why put any aspect of our historic polity at risk for a remote possibility, when we could use the climate and opportunities of the day to work within our polity and make the ties that bind in the SBC even stronger?

Fourth, consider the risks of sole membership. The risks of maintaining organizational autonomy have been noted, but there are also risks with sole membership. What disturbs me the most about the strategy of sole membership is that quite unintentionally it creates the potential for direct control of the denominational structure in a way unmatched in our history. Suppose the Executive Committee recommended the SBC authorize them to exercise the sole membership rights of the Convention, and it was approved. Suddenly the foundation for a leadership hierarchy is in place. Entity leaders would feel a greater accountability to the Executive Committee, which is always functioning, than to the messengers of the SBC who function only two days a year. The Executive Committee has already led the Convention to drop from a three-day meeting to a two-day meeting to save time and money. Suppose they recommended the SBC meet every two years instead of every year to save even more money. How much power would that give an Executive Committee empowered to act as the sole member of every entity corporation between meetings of the SBC? The voice of our churches would be very weak compared to the voice of a small group of people in position to control. Are such scenarios unlikely? I suggest these scenarios are as likely as an attempt by any entity head to take an entity away from the SBC. It is conceivable that sole membership could one day give a person or persons who gained control of the denominational structure a voice louder than the voices of our churches. Should that happen, we might have eliminated any possibility of losing an SBC entity, but at what price?

The Effectiveness of the Baptist Way

The story of the Southern Baptist Convention to date is the stuff of legend. Without an identified human leader of the whole denomination, we grew to a size none would have predicted at our founding. Without one constant human voice

casting again and again the vision for us all, we have all kept the Great Commission at the center of our denominational life. Without the power of wide, extensive control in any convention, body, entity, or person, we have been bound together by the glue of a common perspective on doctrine and a shared passion to take Christ to the world. **The truth of the matter is this: We found in the work of our churches the agenda for our Convention. We heard in the voices of our pastors and people the vision being cast for our future. We knew instinctively the danger of letting any person, denominational body, or entity gain a louder voice than the voice of our churches, for it is through the churches that Jesus has spoken to His people most clearly, and through the churches that Jesus has done the most significant work of our beloved Convention.**

Everyone seems to agree that there is no chance any entity could possibly leave the SBC for years to come. The question on the table, then, is about future risks. Which is the more dangerous risk for Southern Baptists, the possible loss of an entity or the possibility of a diminished voice for our local churches in all the affairs of our Convention? Baptist polity has historically emphasized that the voice of the church is the most important voice at the table of denominational affairs. Perhaps our organizational autonomy is not broken and does not need fixing. Perhaps what it really needs is faithful maintenance.

The effectiveness of the Baptist way to order the work of our Convention is a wonder. It has been plain enough to be followed consistently for generation after generation. It has been flexible enough to survive phenomenal growth and profound cultural change. It has been strong enough to sustain unity through theological storms, political squabbles, and the most significant course correction in the history of American religious life. Organizational autonomy may involve a risk, but I believe it is a risk worth taking.

In the next two months, your Trustees and I will make a final decision on whether or not the sole membership strategy is appropriate for our Seminary. It is a tough, complicated decision, made more difficult because some attorneys think issues of ascending liability for the Southern Baptist Convention could also be at stake. We have made tough, complicated decisions before, however, and we will come to a conclusion on this one. You can be confident that when we make our decision in October, it will be made on the basis of a shared commitment on the part of the Trustees and me to do what we believe to be best for Southern Baptists, for without them there would be no New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary.

Pray for us this fall as we prepare for final discussions and the decision. Pray not

that we would decide one way or the other. Rather pray that by the time every aspect of the decision is discussed and considered, we will have a shared understanding and a united spirit. Baptists in any Baptist body need never fear making the hard, complex decisions that inevitably come as time goes by, for God will both guide His people in the choice, and follow the choice with the grace and peace to move on from any one decision to whatever is next on His Kingdom's agenda. This, too, is the Baptist way. **Put me down as a man proud to be a Southern Baptist and passionately committed to preserving the Southern Baptist way of doing church!**