

Baptist Polity and the State Convention

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Introduction

Ours is an era marked with rapid and often spastic change. With change, problems become more complex—even in the church, or perhaps *especially* in the church, because we often wed our theology and methodology! Information and management of information tend to become less effective in direct proportion to the rapidity of change. Today's climate of change is turbulent at best and devastating/destructive at worst. Someone said it well, "People must move with the caution of an alley cat in a mine field."

Survival demands flexibility on the part of leadership. However, this flexibility must happen without the loss of integrity and credibility of principles. We cannot build churches on fads, fashions and political correctness. Something that is morally wrong cannot be politically correct or theologically acceptable. We cannot ignore or denigrate our heritage as Baptists.

Our world does face an uncertain and unsettled future. The church does not. The power of the Holy Spirit will give us the energy to initiate and sustain action until our best intention becomes reality. Our great problem in the church is not change—not even motivation—it is apathy and fear. As a result often we are guilty of over-managing and under-leading. We do not need to master the routine or become connoisseurs of the obvious; we need to develop leadership skills that put us on the "end of the limb."

Leadership by directive is over. Leadership in the midst of change must learn that others will expect efficiency, effectiveness and accountability. It may mean a change of mind, attitude and/or behavior. It will mean decision. Indecision is most often a terrible mistake in the midst of rapid change. Decisions will cause tension—but little happens without tension. You cannot rule out tension when you lead by expectation and example. However, if we think change is difficult, try irrelevance!

Polity is how we structure to accomplish our purpose. Four factors always shape life in a Baptist church: theology, legal issues, tradition and pragmatism. At times one will dominate but all will be involved at some level.

Church governments vary, i.e. informal, independent, hierarchal, delegated and congregation, etc. Within these there will also be variations. Baptists have generally been congregational in government.

Baptist state conventions follow the basic patterns of Baptist churches. There are certain decisions administration can make; certain decisions the State Board of Missions must make and certain decisions the convention in session must make or approve each interdependent on the other.

When there are no serious problems, each independent entity functions well. The confusion comes when the autonomy and identity of each is threatened by the other.

Background of Bylaw 2, Florida Baptist State Convention

In October of 1995, the Alachua Baptist Association dealt with a theological problem among three of their affiliated churches. One church withdrew from the association and two churches were dismissed from the fellowship of the association.

The immediate issue for the State Board of Missions of the Florida Baptist State Convention (our Executive Committee) was the assumption on the part of the churches that they would become churches-at-large with the Florida Baptist State Convention. The association objected to that scenario.

Until this time the only procedure necessary to be a church-at-large with the Florida Baptist State Convention was to send money for Baptist causes. There was no process for accepting or rejecting churches. We had no documents for handling this situation.

The State Board of Missions, at my urging, set in place a temporary process:

Step 1:

The Executive Director-Treasurer, Assistant Executive Director, State Convention President and two State Board of Missions members would meet with the leadership of the churches individually and as quickly as possible and as many times as needed.

Step 2:

In the meeting, the church leadership would be probed concerning their theology. In this case the issue was more excessive neo-Pentecostal practices.

Step 3:

Report the findings and recommendations to the State Board of Missions for a recommendation to the state convention about the disposition of the three churches.

One church decided it was not that important, so they refused to meet. We met with one church twice and the third church only once. Leadership from both churches admitted they had led their churches into neo-Pentecostal teaching and exercise beyond what would normally be tolerated by Baptists.

After the second visit with one church, the pastor requested to be removed from the churches of the Florida Baptist State Convention. The other church was recommended for dismissal which was communicated to them and graciously received.

From this experience and over a period of time, a committee of the State Board of Missions agonized with the question, “How do you define cooperation among Southern Baptists?” We finally settled on a framework that must include theology, declaration, financial and statistical. This became the heart of Bylaw 2. Baptist Cooperation (see Appendix).

The first year we secured the statistics on cooperation, our first report from the Annual Church Profile revealed that 581 churches had not given through the Cooperative Program the prior year. We realized we needed to analyze the situation and find ways to assist the churches. At no time did the State Board of Missions see this as punitive action. Our posture from the beginning has been that churches need a mission program and must be accountable if they are to remain part of the Florida Baptist State Convention. This is especially true if they are under the umbrella of our tax-exempt status.

The staff began devising a plan of contact and encouragement. We have worked diligently at the task of not disenfranchising churches but offering assistance and hope. From our Annual Church Profile report in 2002 (latest available), there were 45 churches that did not give a minimum of \$250 through the Cooperative Program. When we concluded our collection of Annual Church Profiles for 2002, including the use of our developed “short form,” the Florida Baptist Convention had pertinent information on all except 88 churches and missions.

The conclusion of our State Board of Missions in the Bylaw is assisting in establishing accountability and encouraging churches to invest in the world missions program of the Southern Baptist Convention through the Cooperative Program.

Appendix **Bylaw 2. Baptist Cooperation**

A. Cooperation – Cooperation is a cornerstone to the very foundation of Southern Baptist life. A basic principle inherent in cooperation is the autonomy of the local church, the

Baptist association and the state convention. Inherent in autonomy is the responsibility of this State Convention to define with whom it will cooperate and define what constitutes cooperation.

It is the desire of the State Convention that each church be affiliated with a cooperating Baptist association and the Southern Baptist Convention. A cooperating church does not have to be affiliated with a cooperating Baptist association or the Southern Baptist Convention in order to cooperate and affiliate with this State Convention. A church may seek to affiliate directly with the State Convention by securing Church-at-Large status as defined within these Bylaws.

B. Cooperating Local Church – The State Convention declares that a cooperating Southern Baptist church shall be that autonomous body of Christian believers, which by its free will makes a commitment to and demonstrates cooperation according to State Convention criteria:

(1) Participation: A cooperating church is entitled to certain defined benefits through its cooperation and financial support. These benefits shall include, but not be limited to:

- (a) Eligible to send messengers to the State Convention’s annual meeting;
- (b) Eligible for its church members to be elected to serve as a State Convention officer and/or to be elected or appointed to serve as a member or director of a State Convention committee, board, agency, committee, board, agency, commission or institution;
- (c) Eligible to be a recipient and beneficiary of the ministries, resources, services, assistance programs and endorsements provided by the agencies and institutions of this State Convention; and
- (d) Eligible to participate in the cooperative missions and evangelism efforts of Southern Baptists in Florida, the United States and around the world.

(2) Cooperation: The following criteria shall be demonstrated by any Southern Baptist church which seeks to be considered cooperating and affiliated with the Florida Baptist State Convention and its agency, the Florida Baptist Convention, Inc.;

(a) *Theological*: The church shall have specified within its adopted Statement of Faith and Practice and/or governing documents, a declaration that the basis for its theology, faith, practice and polity is the Bible, with the *Baptist Faith and Message*, revised in the year 2000, or any other declaration of faith which parallels the tenets of our historic Baptist faith, as the theological framework.

(b) *Declaration*: The church shall, in a regular business session, by an affirmative vote express its intent and commitment to cooperate and be affiliated with the Florida Baptist State Convention. Such action shall be recorded in a written communication to be sent to the Executive Director-Treasurer of the Florida Baptist Convention.

(c) *Financial*: The church shall annually make a \$250 financial contribution through the Cooperative Program.

(d) *Statistical*: The church shall annually provide an annual church statistical profile which demonstrates its statewide cooperation and partnership with other Florida Baptist churches.

(3) Acceptance of New Congregations – Each year, during the annual meeting of the State Convention, a report shall be made by the State Board of Missions identifying the newly-constituted Southern Baptist churches, including those new congregations recognized as being Church-at-Large, and which have made commitments to cooperate and affiliate with this State Convention. These churches shall be endorsed by the State Convention, through an affirmative vote of the messengers present during a designated business session.

(4) Existing Relationship: Any Southern Baptist church or church-type mission, including those designated as Church-at-Large, which were organized, functioning and cooperating with the Florida Baptist State Convention at the time this bylaw was approved [November 1996], shall be considered and designated as cooperating for the purposes of these bylaws.

It is the desire of the State Convention to encourage any existing cooperating church, which does not presently fulfill the parameters of cooperation, to do so.

(5) Assignment to the State Board of Missions: The State Convention directs and empowers the State Board of Missions to determine and mediate questions involving churches which seek affiliation on the basis of Church-at-Large status with the Florida Baptist State Convention.

(a) The Board shall assign this task to its appropriate committees and approve any guidelines and procedures to be followed by the Board.

(b) The Board shall annually report and recommend to the Florida Baptist State Convention for endorsement those churches which have made commitments to cooperate and affiliate with this State Convention.

C. Cooperating Baptist Association – The State Convention recognizes that a cooperating Baptist association shall be that duly constituted and autonomous organization of affiliated and cooperating Southern Baptist churches, which by their collective free will as an association, make a commitment to and demonstrate cooperation according to State Convention criteria, shall be considered in sympathy and cooperation with this State Convention, its purposes and work. Those criteria are herein defined.

(1) Defined Role: The State Convention endorses the historic and traditional role of the Baptist association serving as the theological guardian of Southern Baptist theology, faith, practice and polity of Southern Baptist churches cooperating with the Florida Baptist State Convention.

(2) Endorsements: The State Convention accepts the endorsement given to a local Southern Baptist church which is made by a cooperating Baptist association.

(3) Participation: Within these bylaws, provision is made for each cooperating autonomous association to be entitled to a certain number of member(s) to participate on the Committee on Nominations and the State Board of Missions. In addition, a cooperating association is entitled to certain defined benefits provided by the State Convention through its agency, the Florida Baptist Convention, Inc.

(4) Cooperation: The following criteria shall be expected of any Baptist association which seeks to be considered cooperating and affiliated with the Florida Baptist State Convention and its agency, the Florida Baptist Convention, Inc.:

(a) *Theological*: The association shall have specified within its adopted governing documents a declaration that the basis for the theology, faith, practice and polity of its cooperating churches is the Bible with the *Baptist Faith and Message*, revised in the year 2000, or any other declaration of faith which parallels the tenets of our historic Baptist faith, as the theological framework. The governing document shall provide for a process by which the association shall determine if each Baptist church seeking affiliation with the association, does affirm commitment to the theology, faith, practice and polity outlined in the Bible, with the *Baptist Faith and Message*, revised in the year 2000, or any other declaration of faith which parallels the tenets of our historic Baptist faith, as the theological framework.

(b) *Declaration*: The association shall, in an annual meeting, by an affirmative vote express its intent and commitment to cooperate with the Florida Baptist State Convention and its agency, the Florida Baptist Convention, Inc. Such action shall be recorded in a written communication to be sent to the Executive Director-Treasurer of the Florida Baptist Convention, Inc.

(c) *Cooperative Agreement*: Each existing association if it desires, shall have opportunity to enter into a Cooperative Agreement with the State Convention's agency, the Florida Baptist Convention, Inc.

Once a Cooperative Agreement has been negotiated, the association's executive board shall make final approval of the Agreement. The proposed agreement also shall be approved by the State Board of Missions.

Such agreement shall specify the partnership roles, expectations and commitment by each entity regarding program resources, annual planning coordination, personnel assistance, potential funding, duration of the Cooperative Agreement, and any other issues of mutual concern.

(5) Existing Relationship: Any Baptist association which was organized, functioning and cooperating with the Florida Baptist State Convention and its agency, the Florida Baptist Convention, Inc., at the time this bylaw was approved [November, 1996], shall be considered and designated as cooperating for the purposes of these bylaws.

D. New Associations – Any newly-organized or re-organized Baptist association must fulfill State Convention criteria before it shall be recognized as a “cooperating” association affiliated with the Florida Baptist State Convention and its agency, the Florida Baptist Convention, Inc.

(1) Membership: The association shall be comprised of at least 15 constituted Southern Baptist churches and whose combined total church membership shall be at least 7,000 persons.

(2) Application: The association’s executive committee shall prepare and submit an “Application for Cooperation” to be received, reviewed and approved by the State Board of Missions and its appropriate committee.

(3) Theological: The association shall have specified within its adopted governing documents a declaration that the basis for the theology, faith, practice and polity of its cooperating churches is the Bible, with the *Baptist Faith and Message*, revised in the year 2000, or any other declaration of faith which parallels the tenets of our historic Baptist faith, as the theological framework.

(a) This governing document shall provide for a process by which the association shall determine if each Baptist church seeking affiliation with the association, does affirm commitment to the theology, faith, practice and polity outlined in the Bible, with the *Baptist Faith and Message*, revised in the year 2000, or any other declaration of faith which parallels the tenets of our historic Baptist faith, as the theological framework.

(b) The association shall provide documentation that all of its then current cooperating churches do endorse the theology, faith, practice and polity outlined in the Bible, with the *Baptist Faith and Message*, revised in the year 2000, or any other declaration of faith which parallels the tenets of our historic Baptist faith, as the theological framework.

(4) Declaration: Each newly-organized association shall, in an annual meeting, by an affirmative vote express its intent and commitment to cooperate with the Florida Baptist State Convention and its agency, the Florida Baptist State Convention, Inc. Such action shall be recorded in a written communication to be sent to the Executive Director-Treasurer of the Florida Baptist Convention.

(5) Cooperative Agreement: Each newly-organized cooperating association shall have the opportunity to enter into a Cooperative Agreement with the State Convention’s agency, the Florida Baptist Convention, Inc.

Once a Cooperative Agreement has been negotiated, the association’s executive board shall make final approval of the Agreement.

(a) Upon the “provisional cooperating acceptance by the State Board of Missions, the association’s executive board shall, within six months, negotiate and make final approval of

the Cooperative Agreement entered into with the Florida Baptist Convention, Inc. The proposed agreement also shall be approved by the State Board of Missions.

(b) Such agreement shall specify the partnership roles, expectations, and commitments by each entity regarding program resources, annual planning coordination, personnel assistance, potential funding, duration of the Cooperative Agreement and any other issues of mutual concern.

(6) Provisional Status: The State Convention directs and empowers the State Board of Missions, through its appropriate committees to establish guidelines and procedures, by which to receive, review and grant “provisional cooperating acceptance” status to any newly-organized association which seeks to be considered for “unconditional cooperating” status.

(a) When the parameters of cooperation have been met, an association shall be considered ready for presentation to the State Convention. The State Board of Missions may recommend that the Florida Baptist State Convention, during its next annual meeting, confer unconditional cooperating status upon the requesting association.

(b) The year following approval by the State Convention and in subsequent years, the newly-organized or re-organized association shall then be eligible for a member on the State Convention’s Committee on Nominations and shall qualify for at least one member from its cooperating churches being nominated to serve on the State Board of Missions, as provided for in these bylaws.

E. Southern Baptist Convention: The Florida Baptist State Convention declares that it fraternally cooperates with and supports the Southern Baptist Convention and its agencies of work.

(1) As a demonstration of this cooperation, the State Convention promotes giving through the Cooperative Program and serves as the conduit for the distribution of Cooperative Program funds given by cooperating churches.

(2) To facilitate Baptist cooperation, this State Convention has empowered its State Board of Missions to enter into Cooperative Agreements with selected agencies of the Southern Baptist Convention which relate to mission, ministries, and support services provided by the State Convention agency, the Florida Baptist Convention, Inc.

-End of Bylaw 2-