

CHURCHES COOPERATING . . .
SCRIPTURALLY AND UN-SCRIPTURALLY

By L. S. Walker
Past President,
Baptist Missionary Association of America

Published By
Publications Department of
The Baptist Missionary Association of Mississippi
4228 Highway 15 N., Laurel, Miss. 39440

CHURCHES COOPERATING SCRIPTURAL AND UN-SCRIPTURAL

We believe the Scriptures clearly hold that New Testament churches, in every century since their beginning, have by mutual consent and agreement, cooperated as equals for a more effective implementation of the Great Commission as given by Christ during His earthly ministry. Some modern systems have, in our opinion, grossly violated some fundamental tenets of the Scriptures relative to the work of the Lord's churches.

There are, for example, numerous systems of cooperative work used by various Baptist groups. Some of these are definitely alien to the Word of God. Prominent among these systems today is the Convention system.

In this terse commentary we will treat on the two more prominent systems utilized by the great majority of Baptist churches in the light of history and the Holy Scriptures. These two systems are commonly known as the Convention System and the Association System. First let us take up . . .

THE ORIGIN AND HISTORY OF CONVENTIONISM

Conventionism is a relatively late system of cooperative endeavor utilized in our time mostly by the Southern Baptist Convention and the American Baptist Convention. The people who are identified with this system are commonly known as "Convention" Baptists. Thus, the term "Convention" is applied to their national and most of their state organizations.

1. The Convention system originated at Kettering, England, in the year 1792, without church authority. It was organized in the back parlor of a private home by twelve ministers. In the Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention of 1890, p. 11, we read:

"The Centennial of the modern missionary enterprise is at hand. In October, 1792, a little band of brethren gathered in a house of a Baptist lady, made the first contribution to the cause of modern missions." They admit that it was just that - "modern," or of late

origin.

Dr. Richard B. Cook, in his "Story of the Baptists," p. 305, speaking of the society formed at Kettering, says:

"This was a small beginning for a missionary society, (not churches - LSW) but it was a very respectable contribution for twelve ministers, in view of the times and their very small salaries."

While we most heartily commend the zeal for the salvation of the heathen as manifested by the twelve ministers, it is difficult to understand why they would effect their movement apart from the churches. It was, therefore, at best a human society.

2. The Triennial Convention was organized in America, at Philadelphia, in 1814, as a missionary society, and called by this name because it met every three years. Its original name was: "The General Missionary Convention of the Baptist Denomination in the United States for Foreign Missions." It consisted of societies and had a money basis for its membership. It followed the pattern of the Kettering society.

Robert G. Torbet, in his "History of the Baptists," p. 268, says of the convention:

"The Constitution provided that not more than two delegates should be sent from each of the local and state mission societies and from other religious bodies of the denomination that contributed at least one hundred dollars a year to the missionary fund of the convention."

Let us be reminded that New Testament churches had been working in an associated capacity for the propagation of the gospel since the first century. Long before the Kettering Society, or the Triennial Convention were known among Baptists.

The Philadelphia Baptist Association, for example, was organized in 1707. This old association of churches was working together spreading the Good News of God's Word one hundred and seven years before the first general convention in America.

If the Holy Scriptures are an all-sufficient rule for faith and

practice, as has been historically held by Baptists through the centuries, the logical question arises as to the necessity of such a new system for the implementation of the Great Commission?

"All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness:

"That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works." (2 Tim. 3:16-17)

In 1845, when a division between the Baptists of the North and South took place over the slavery question and subsequent effects, the Southern Baptist Convention was organized; and in May of the following year the Convention Baptists of the Northern States reorganized under the name of the American Baptist Missionary Union (Encyclopedia of Missions, by Dwight, Turner and Eliss, p. 18.) This name prevailed until May, 1907, when in Washington, D.C., another reorganization of the Convention Baptists of the North was effected, which took the name of Northern Baptist Convention. At the annual meeting in Boston, May 24, 1950, the name was changed to American Baptist Convention.

Having tersely sketched the beginning and ensuing history of the convention system from the early Kettering Society in England to its beach-head among the Baptists of America, under its different organization titles, by the help of the Lord, we will direct our study to the even more liberal system, under the appellation of the Southern Baptist Convention. While we do not agree with it, this great body of Baptists has made the system prominent. We make these terse observations with profound respect for the zeal and accomplishments of these brethren in Christ.

THE CONVENTION AND THE CHURCHES

Having traced the Convention system from its beginning as a missionary society in Kettering, England, in 1792, to the Triennial Convention in America in 1814. Then to the division between those of the North and the South in 1845, into what we now know as the American (Northern) Baptist Convention and the Southern Baptist Convention. In tracing the system through its history, it is clear to see that it has grown much more liberal and insensible to the

fundamental principles of God's Word. It has been our studied observation that the Southern Baptist Convention has become much more liberal than it was in its beginning 128 years ago.

1. The convention over the churches.

The Southern Baptist Convention is a corporation of individuals, not an association of churches. This we read as follows:

"Be it enacted by the Senate and the House of Representatives of the State of Georgia, in General Assembly met, and is hereby enacted by the authority of the same, That from and after the passage of this Act, That William B. Johnson, Wilson Lumpkin, James B. Taylor, A. Dockey (A. Dockery, 1845 minutes), R. B. C. Howell, and others, either associates and successors, be and they are hereby incorporated and made a body politic by the name and style of the SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONVENTION, with authority to receive, hold, possess, retain and dispose of property, either real or personal, to sue and to be sued, and to make all by-laws, rules and regulations necessary to the transaction of their business, not inconsistent with the laws of this State or of the United States: said corporation being created for the purpose of eliciting, combining and directing the energies of the BAPTIST DENOMINATION OF CHRISTIANS, for the propagation of the gospel, any law, usage or custom to the contrary notwithstanding.

Approved December 2, 1845 (Charter of S.B.C.)."

While circumstances may require that even religious institutions be chartered for the transaction of business, it is not required by the laws of any State or of the United States that a group of individuals form a "body politic" for the purpose of controlling the "energies of the BAPTIST DENOMINATION OF CHRISTIANS." The last phrase is a change of the wording as it appears in the earlier Annuals

of the S.B.C., in which it reads: "The energies of the whole denomination." By this Charter we understand that the Southern Baptist Convention set itself up with legal authority to controll the energies of the whole Baptist "denomination," and thereby makes itself an incorporated dicatorship over the churches. (This is the spirit of Rome - LSW.)

The Convention corporation was created for the purpose: (1) To elicit, or draw out, the energies of the BAPTIST DENOMINATION. (2) To combine, or put together the energies of the BAPTIST DENOMINATION. (3) To direct, or CONTROLL the energies of the BAPTIST DENOMINATION. Here we see that a human institution is incorporated with legal authority to say to the divine institution, the churches of Christ, I propose to draw out, combine and CONTROLL your energies. This makes a human institution a dictator over the divine, for if it controll the energies of the churches it of necessity controls the churches themselves. It might be said in reply that no such prerogative is exercised by the Convention. Well, then, why does it lay claim to such a right? The claim is wholly contrary to the exhortation of the Head and Master of the church, as follows:

"But Jesus called them unto him, and said, Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; and whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant." Matthew 20:25-27. (Baptist Church Doctrines and History.)

The sacred scriptures above forbids the creation and practice of human lordship over God's heritage. If indeed the Southern Baptist Convention Board intended to exercise iron-handed controll over the Lord's churches; if it was their plan to draw out, put together and controll the energies of the churches, as the language of the Charter so clearly states, it must be the height of presumption. One signal difference between the scriptural way of associational

work and that of the Convention system is: that a scriptural association is created by the churches which it serves; but the Convention system is set up apart from any church authority, and and seeks to controll the churches.

2. Founded without church authority.

Like the Kettering Society, and Triennial Convention, the Southern Baptist Convention was founded apart from strict church authority, as shown by the Charter refered to above, as well as the following quotation from the preamble to their constitution:

"The messengers from missionary societies, churches, and other religious bodies of the Baptist denomination in various parts of the United States, met in Augusta, Georgia, May 8, 1845, for the purpose of carrying into effect the benevolent intention of our constituents by organizing a plan for eliciting, combining, and directing the energies of the denomination for the propagation of of the gospel."

Let it be noted that the Southern Baptist Convention was organized by messengers from: (1) "missionary societies"; (2) "churches"; and (3) "other religious bodies of the Baptist denomination in various parts of the United States." This puts the authority of "societies" and "other religious bodies" on par with that of the churches. Therefore the Convention is backed by the authority of society, a thing wholly unknown in the New Testament.

Yes, to be sure, it should make a difference what we believe, practice, fellowship or support.

3. A money basis for representation.

"Art. III. MEMBERSHIP: The Convention shall consist of messengers who are members of missionary Baptist churches co-operating with the Convention as follows:

1. One messenger from each such church which is in friendly cooperation with this Convention and sympathetic with its purposes and work and has during the fiscal year preceding been a bono fide

contributor to the Convention's work.

2. One additional messenger from each such church for every 250 members; or for each \$250.00 paid to the work of the Convention during the fiscal year preceding the annual meeting.

3. The messengers shall be appointed and certified by the churches to the Convention, but no church may appoint more than ten (10).

4. Each messenger shall be a member of the church by which he is appointed." - page 30, 1966 S.B.C. Annual.

It matters not how poor a congregation may be, nor how deserving and honorable it may be otherwise, nor how many precious souls they may have won through personal work, etc., it cannot be represented at the annual meeting of the Convention unless some contribution has been paid into the work of the Convention for the preceding fiscal year. Then such poor or smaller churches cannot have additional messengers, like the richer congregations, without having paid \$250.00 for each additional messenger. This puts representation of the churches at the annual meetings strictly on a money basis.

4. Unequal church power.

The Southern Baptist Convention gives power to the wealthy churches. A church with money may have as many as ten messengers, provided the sum of \$250.00 for each messenger above one and up to ten is paid to the Convention work. This system would allow a wealthy church to have as many votes at a convention as ten weaker churches. Such inequality is not scriptural.

There may be those who would attempt to justify such a system by contending that allowing greater representation for larger churches is fair and democratic because the larger churches represent a greater number of people. This sounds compatible to human logic. But we are not dealing with human logic. We are dealing with the Scriptures. Let it be kept in mind that our Lord gave the Great Commission to a local church. The local church is, therefore, the scriptural unit of authoritative representation in associational

meetings, and not individuals.

There are legions of great and loveable Christian people in the thousands of churches working with the Southern Baptist Convention. Among their ministers are some of the most able, noble and dedicated men to be found anywhere. Many of them are my best personal friends. I love and deeply appreciate them. But it is my humble and sincere opinion that they are cooperating with a system which stands in violation of the Word of God. Our disagreement is certainly not based upon personalities, but rather upon divine principles. I grew up in a Southern Baptist Convention church where some of the dearest and best people on earth hold membership and worship. I disagreed with the system more than thirty years ago. I am more in disagreement with it now than I was then. This is due to the fact that the Convention work has grown more liberal year after year. They embraced the "Universal Church" idea many years ago. Such a fallacy opens the doors to all kinds of error and liberalism. Some churches are now ordaining women to the gospel ministry. Thus the trend runs toward modernism and liberalism.

5. Conventionism is un-scriptural.

1. The modern convention system is an invention of men and not a revelation of God. It is both un-scriptural and extra-scriptural.
2. It ignores the laws of Christ and sets up rules of its own.
3. It is unknown to the Bible.
4. It is based upon a financial and numerical rule.
 - A. It gives the rich an advantage over the poor.
 - B. It permits the larger churches to overlord it over the smaller and poorer ones.
5. It demonstrates a presumptuous and Romish spirit.
6. It breeds confusion among the churches. Meddles in national and world politics.
7. Fosters liberalism and destroys othodoxy.
 - A. If the divine plan of the New Testament for World evangelism is sufficient, why set up another plan? It insults God.
8. In embracing the "Universal Church" theory, it destroys the real place and purpose of the ordinances; makes discipline impossible; breaks down doctrinal barriers and opens the way for every known heresy.
9. It refuses to recognize the local church as the scriptural unit of

representation, and recognizes the individual instead.

10. It fails to recognize the principles of equality among churches and ministers.

WHAT ABOUT ASSOCIATIONS?

After having discussed the origin and history of the Convention system among Baptists, what about Associations among Baptists? Where and when did this system have its beginning? Are Associations known to the Scriptures?

An Association is Scriptural if it is indeed a "joint-cooperation and fellowship of the churches composing it," allowing each church an equal voice in all matters of common interest.

There are numerous examples in the New Testament of churches jointly working together for common causes. When by their own free-will, two or more churches, choose to work together, that is an association, whether you call it that or not. No one can tell local New Testament churches that they must work together, neither can anyone tell them they cannot. It is their choice to make. This proves them to be independent and autonomous.

Acts 14:24-28; 15:1-30 tells of the Church at Antioch and the Church at Jerusalem working together for the preservation of sound doctrine. The meetings both at Jerusalem and then at Antioch with the discussions which took place there involved church-sent messengers.

Acts 20:1-4 tells of those who accompanied Paul into Asia. "And there accompanied him into Asia Sopater of Berea; and of the Thessalonians, Aristarchus and Secundus; and Gaius of Derbe, and Timeotheus; and of Asia, Tychicus and Trophimus."

This involves at least four local churches and their messengers who were chosen to travel with Paul.

It is evident that there was in effect an association of churches in Macedonia. Paul speaks of the Churches (plural) of Macedonia in II Cor. 8:1. In verses 18-19 of the same chapter: "And we have sent with him the brother, whose praise is in the gospel throughout ALL THE CHURCHES; and not that only, but who was also CHOSEN OF THE CHURCHES to travel with us with this grace, which is administered by us to the glory of the same Lord, and declaration of your ready mind."

In his message to the Church at Corinth, Paul spoke of "TAKING WAGES" of "OTHER CHURCHES" to do them service (II Cor. 11:8-9). Here Paul received financial support - even wages, if you please, from OTHER CHURCHES, in an associated or cooperative capacity, to preach the gospel to the Corinthians. This was clearly a united, cooperative or associational joint-effort on the part of several churches. It was for all practical purposes, an associational work.

In verse 23 of chapter 8, the inspired Apostle says: "Whether any do inquire of Titus, He is my partner and fellowhelper concerning you; or our brethren be inquired of, they are THE MESSENGERS OF THE CHURCHES, and the glory of Christ."

Authority for cooperation in an associational capacity on the basis of equality is found in the passages referred to above, along with many other passages. In modern parlance we would refer to the work as described in II Cor. 8 as the "Macedonia Baptist Association," which appellation would be scriptural if applied in Paul's Day or our day. At the time Paul wrote this letter there were at least three churches in the province of Macedonia - the Church at Phillipi, the Church at Thessalonica, and the Church at Berea. But in their cooperation they did not form a state church, or any such thing, as each remained an independent entity.

Every New Testament Church is an autonomous body under the Sovereign Headship of Jesus Christ who is "Head over all things to the church." It has a divine commission to carry the message of Christ to all the world. It is each local church's privilege to attempt this magnanimous task alone if she so desires. But it seems clear that from the beginning the Holy Spirit thought it prudent to lead the churches to work together. Where there is unity there is strength. As the members of local congregations can be more effective when they work closer together, so can the local churches more effectively expedite their work for the Lord when working together. As individual Christians need one another, so the Lord's churches need one another. New Testament Churches have always exercised their independence, but they have never committed themselves to the folly of isolationism.

I am an independent Christian and member of my church, but it would seem foolish indeed to isolate myself from the fellowship of other members. I am an independent American, but it would seem a little silly to build a fence around myself.

From the time of the first century the churches have chosen to work together. As a result the gospel has been preached, the work of the Lord strengthened, and the number of disciples increased through the intervening centuries. In this way the first century Baptists spread over parts of Europe, Asia and into the British Isles where we soon find the Welsh Baptists, who were the forerunners of the earliest American Baptists. History tells us of the existence of a Baptist association in Wales as early as the year 600.

In 1707 the Philadelphia Baptist Association was organized. This was eighty-five years before the modern Convention system was born in Kettering, England. The Philadelphia Association had its beginning one hundred and seven years before the first general Convention was organized in America - the Triennial Convention. This was 138 years before the organization of the Southern Baptist Convention in Augusta, Georgia.

The late day so-called "Independent" Baptists, sometimes called "Bible" Baptist, "Fundamentalist," "Direct Gospel Missioners," etc. are usually the work of self-designing individuals who want to "run the show." When some Roman-spirited, self-seeking men cannot have their way, they often start a way or system of their own. Many of these movements are the work of sensationalist who seek to heap praise upon themselves. It is also a fairly well established fact that a "preacher rule" over the churches is exercised by the pastors.

Associational work among the Lord's churches is a well established fact in the Scriptures and in history. The almost phenomenal growth and development of the Baptist work in the world was not accomplished by churches who isolated themselves, but rather by churches working together under the glorious Headship of Jesus Christ, and the administration of the Holy Spirit, with the Holy Scriptures as their only and all-sufficient rule and guide for both faith and practice.

Associations, in the New Testament sense, are created by the churches, and must forever remain subservient to the will of the churches of which they are composed.

The Baptist Missionary Association of America, like New Testament churches in every century, cooperate as equals in an associated capacity in a New Testament program of world missions, education and benevolence. It is an association of churches, and not a convention of individuals. Its annual meeting of messengers is subject to the churches. The powers of the Association are limited to the execution of the expressed will of the churches.