

SBC warned on veering further right: A risk of Pharisaism

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Southern Baptists broke ties with their global brethren in the Baptist World Alliance, marshaled support for a familiar list of social issues, and voted to keep the Southern Baptist Convention name, despite suggestions that it hinders their image and growth.

In an emotional highlight of their annual meeting June 15-16 in Indianapolis, about 8,000 SBC messengers cheered President George W. Bush during the born-again president's address live via satellite from the White House. Bush enlisted Southern Baptist help in promoting his social agenda, including a Federal Marriage Amendment, antiabortion legislation, faith-based social initiatives and tax cuts.

Meanwhile, messengers heard sermons laced with warnings about America's moral direction and later passed resolutions opposing gay marriage, lamenting the "secularization" of American culture, and urging Christians to get involved politically and vote "biblical values."

The meeting marked the 25th anniversary of the SBC's historic conservative swing, and speakers frequently praised those leaders who led the so-called "conservative resurgence." But some leaders worried aloud if the next generation of Southern Baptists will carry on their legacy of reform and whether the denomination can recover from its numerical stagnation.

Newly elected SBC President Bobby Welch said the convention is in decline—noting a fourth consecutive year of declining baptisms—and prescribed a plan to recommit Southern Baptists to evangelism. The conservatives are at a "threshold" that could leave the convention "better, worse or stagnated," Welch, pastor of First Baptist Church in Daytona Beach, Florida, told reporters. "But I know we can't tolerate the same-old, same-old."

Morris Chapman, president of the SBC Executive Committee, took the soul-searching even further, warning messengers that the conservative movement is in danger of going too far to the right theologically. Without redirection, the SBC could now “fall into the error of Pharisaism,” he said, “lifeless orthodoxy parading as true faith.” Chapman, who has also served as SBC president in the past, added: “If Southern Baptists steer sharply to the right, we will end up on the road of separatism and independence.” He urged the convention “to return to some sense of normalcy.”

As expected, SBC messengers voted overwhelmingly to end the denomination’s 99-year relationship with the Baptist World Alliance, an international network of Baptist groups. Paige Patterson, speaking for the committee that recommended the break, told messengers that some of the 200-plus denominations worldwide affiliated with the BWA “do not believe in the inerrancy and infallibility of scripture.” Patterson, president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, also said that the SBC withdrawal in part was motivated by the “leftward drift” of such BWA members as the American Baptist Churches USA, which he claimed contains a “gay presence.”

ABCUSA leaders said they were surprised by Patterson’s claims, reported the American Baptist News Service. “Dr. Patterson’s statement is completely outrageous,” said ABC General Secretary A. Roy Medley. “Nowhere, in any of the conversations with the BWA, has such an excuse ever been given.” The Southern Baptist pullout, he added, “was clearly and solely a response to the BWA’s vote to welcome the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship,” the group of moderate Southern Baptist congregations disenchanted with the SBC swing to the right.

Denton Lotz, BWA executive director, later said the SBC’s charges of liberalism are inaccurate and unfair. “There are 211 confessions or statements of faith” among BWA’s 211 member bodies around the world. “We certainly are not liberal. We’re all conservative evangelicals.”

Addressing the convention a third time in his presidency, Bush emphasized themes that resonated with the convention’s conservative core—the battle against terrorism and the struggle to bring democracy to the Middle East, his record on tax cuts and job creation, as well as on education and Medicare. He called on the U.S. Senate to allow him to appoint conservative judges and on Congress to pass laws supporting government funding for faith-based initiatives. SBC leaders noted that Bush’s appearance did not constitute an endorsement of his reelection campaign.

And convention resolutions on political involvement and support for the military stopped short of endorsing Bush or the war in Iraq. A resolution on Christian citizenship urged “all Christians to vote in accordance with biblical values rather than according to party lines, personalities or candidate rhetoric.” It called on churches to conduct voter registration and education.

But a much-anticipated resolution calling for Southern Baptists to withdraw from public schools failed to gain the approval of the resolutions committee or most of the messengers. The issue of education had been sufficiently addressed in past statements, the committee said, while the issue of how to educate children is best left to parents. An amendment to add the anti-public-school plea to the resolution on secularization failed to garner a majority.

The idea of studying a name change for the Southern Baptist Convention had the preconvention support of SBC President Jack Graham of Dallas. But messengers voted 55 percent to 45 percent not to form a study committee. Supporters of the study, many from outside the South, said the regional name hinders church growth. Noting that the SBC has churches in both the United States and Canada, Herb Stoneman of Salt Lake City said a new name “would better reflect who we are.” – *Greg Warner, Associated Baptist Press*