The Origins of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1814–1845

In 1814, Baptists on the East Coast founded the Triennial Convention, which was a foreign missions society formed to support Adoniram and Ann Judson in their mission work in Burma. Southerners always felt like outsiders in the Triennial Convention because its meetings were held in the North. Southerners also wanted to make the Triennial Convention into an umbrella ministry that supported all kinds of missions priorities, though northerners succeeded in keeping the Convention focused exclusively on foreign missions. Though Baptists in the South supported the Convention, they focused their efforts on building state conventions in the South. For example, the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina (BSCNC) was founded in 1833. Between the 1820s and the 1840s, Baptists in the North and South drifted increasingly apart.

The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) was formed due to a variety of motives. Baptists in the South wanted to form a new convention through which their churches could cooperate in other ministries besides foreign missions. They also believed they needed a new convention because Baptists in the North controlled all the existing ministries and didn’t prioritize home mission work in the South and Southwest. Finally, Baptists in the South had a different opinion of slavery than their northern counterparts. These motives collided when Baptists in the North derailed the efforts to appoint a slaveholder as a missionary to the Cherokees in Georgia and then suggested that no slaveholder was fit to be a foreign missionary either.

In April 1845, almost 293 Baptists met at First Baptist Church Augusta, GA and formed the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). The first SBC president was W.B. Johnson, pastor of First Baptist Church Columbia, SC and chaplain at University of South Carolina. Southern Baptists and their northern brethren still claimed they were part of the same denomination, though after the Civil War the two groups drifted further apart, ending hopes of reconciliation. Three months after the SBC was formed the Rose of Sharon Baptist Church was constituted in what is now Durham County, NC. Jesse Howell was the founding pastor. The church predated the incorporation of the City of Durham by almost a quarter century.

A Century of Growth, 1845–1945

When the SBC was formed in 1845, the first two ministries established by the Convention were the Foreign Mission Board and Home Mission Board. In 1859, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary was founded in Greenville, SC; Southern was the first seminary in the South. The founding president, James P. Boyce, was arguably the best-educated Baptist pastor in the South and proved to be a prolific theologian. The SBC experienced steady growth during its first decade and a half, but like everything else in the South the SBC was almost destroyed by the Civil War and Reconstruction during the 1860s and 1870s. By the late 1870s, the SBC was beginning to prosper once again with new churches being planted all over the South and Southwest and new ministries being established to serve those churches in various ways.
Southern Seminary relocated to Louisville, KY in 1877, a move that saved the seminary from insolvency. In 1881, the Home Mission Board called an entrepreneurial president named I.T. Tichenor who led that ministry during two decades of unprecedented growth. By the 1880s, the Foreign Mission Board was expanding to new nations in Africa, Asia, and South America. A single woman named Lottie Moon departed for China in 1873, where she became the most famous of Southern Baptist missionaries. In 1888, a Woman’s Missionary Union was formed as an auxiliary ministry to aid the FMB in raising money for its expanding missionary force. The key leader was Annie Armstrong of Baltimore. A Baptist Sunday School Board was established in 1891, and in the first two decades of the twentieth century, two new seminaries were founded in Fort Worth, Texas (1908) and New Orleans, Louisiana (1917).

In 1917, the SBC formed an Executive Committee to represent the Convention’s interests between annual meetings. Prior to this time, the SBC only legally existed while in session every summer. In 1925, the SBC made two important decisions with ramifications that continue to the present day. First, the Convention approved a confession of faith, the Baptist Faith and Message (BF&M)—this was the first official denominational confession of faith. Second, the SBC adopted a unified budget called the Cooperative Program (CP) that was intended to unite state conventions with the SBC and provide adequate funding to all denominational ministries. By 1950, the CP had become the most efficient financial structure of any Protestant denomination in America and played a significant role in the further expansion of the SBC after WWII.

During the first half of the twentieth century, the SBC gradually took on a particular ethos that was shaped by a combination of theological convictions, ministry emphases, and cultural context. The Convention’s churches were characterized by a grassroots evangelical theology, a staunch commitment to a Baptist view of the church, a priority on evangelism and missions, and a southern-style political conservatism. Southern Baptists also became a national denomination; by mid-century, there were SBC churches in all fifty states. But even these churches were culturally southern; most of them were new church plants comprised of transplanted southerners who had moved North or West to find better job opportunities.

Rose of Sharon Baptist Church also grew during this period. In its first quarter century of existence, the church planted four other churches; eventually, the congregation helped plant almost twenty other churches in Durham and Orange Counties prior to 1950. In 1877, Rose of Sharon relocated to downtown Durham and adopted the name Durham Baptist Church. The following year, the church again changed its name to First Baptist Church of Durham. In 1927, the congregation built its existing building on Cleveland Street.

**Pragmatists and Progressives, 1945–1980**

After World War II, the SBC launched several influential denominational programs, most of which were focused on evangelism and membership enlistment through Sunday School. For example, during “A Million More in ’54” almost 600,000 members were added to church rolls through a Convention-wide Sunday School recruiting initiative. Other key programs included Royal Ambassadors, Girls in Action, Acteens, Training Union, and Baptist Student Union; these programs provided a cradle-to-grave indoctrination in Southern Baptist identity. The leading congregations during this era were downtown First Baptist churches, most of which
wholeheartedly embraced the full range of denominational programs. FBC Durham was this type of congregation. Between 1940 and 1980, the church was a leading congregation among North Carolina Baptists and hosted many denominational events in its large sanctuary.

The downside to all the programs is that the SBC was becoming increasingly pragmatic, focused upon buildings, budgets, and baptisms more than orthodox theology. During this time period, almost every denominational program was dubbed “missions,” which led to “baptizing” the status quo. (If Southern Baptists were doing it, it was missions, which meant it was something worth doing.) This pragmatism ushered in an era of burgeoning bureaucracy. New denominational ministries were started throughout the 1950s, older ministries significantly expanded their overhead, and corporate consultants were contracted to advise SBC leaders. The pragmatism also created an atmosphere where progressive theology was able to take root in Baptist colleges and seminaries, much of which filtered into churches like FBC Durham.

Though most SBC progressives didn’t become thoroughgoing liberals who denied the incarnation and bodily resurrection, many embraced Darwinism, rejected biblical inerrancy, and advocated women in pastoral ministry. Many also elevated social justice ministries above traditional evangelism and missions (though of course all of it was considered missions). These progressive trends concerned grassroots Southern Baptists, sometimes leading to conflict. In 1963, Ralph Elliot was terminated from Midwestern Seminary following a controversy over his book *The Message of Genesis* (1961), which promoted a liberal interpretation of Genesis 1–11. At Southeastern Seminary, three professors were pressured to resign between 1964 and 1966 for arguing that the Bible should be interpreted mythologically. In 1969, the Sunday School Board published the Broadman Bible Controversy; the Genesis volume was pulled from the shelves in 1970 and revised due to its liberal interpretations.

Some pastors emerged as vocal defenders of sound doctrine, personal evangelism, and missions. W.A. Criswell spent nearly fifty years as the pastor of First Baptist Church of Dallas, TX, which by the 1960s was arguably the largest Baptist church in the world. Criswell defended biblical inerrancy, modeled expositional preaching, and started a conservative Bible college as an alternative to state Baptist colleges. Herschel Hobbs, the longtime pastor of First Baptist Church of Oklahoma City, was another leading conservative who served as a key denominational statesman during this era. The vast majority of pastors served in congregations of less than 150 people—these small church pastors were almost uniformly conservative and evangelistic. On the conservative/progressive spectrum, FBC Durham could be considered centrist. The congregation was always committed to missions and evangelism, but some of her pastors leaned progressive while others were more consistently conservative.

**Conservative Resurgence, 1979–2000**

Many Southern Baptists refer to the final two decades of the twentieth century as the Conservative Resurgence. Conservatives won many battles in the 1960s and early 1970s, but they were frustrated that they made little headway in reversing leftward trends. In 1979, a group of conservative pastors and evangelists launched a movement to take over denominational leadership and bring it in line with the conservative theology of the churches. There were three key leaders in this movement: Paul Pressler, a judge in Houston; Paige Patterson, at the time
president of Criswell College in Dallas; and Adrian Rogers, pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church in Memphis, TN. The central plank in their agenda was advocating biblical inerrancy.

These men and their colleagues discovered that if a conservative SBC president was elected, and if that president appointed conservatives to serve on a denominational nominating committee, and if that nominating committee chose conservatives to fill vacant trustee positions at the denomination’s ministries, then in a decade or so every seminary, agency, and board would be under conservative leadership. Rogers was elected SBC president in 1979, the first in a string of conservative presidents that implemented this strategy. In 1987, conservative majorities began assuming control of trustee boards. As a general rule, the mission boards transitioned fairly peacefully, but the changes at the Sunday School Board (LifeWay) and several seminaries were fraught with controversy. The key year was 1985, when over 45,000 Southern Baptists gathered in Dallas and elected Charles Stanley of First Baptist Church of Atlanta, GA as president.

After the Dallas Convention, the progressives, who preferred to call themselves “moderates,” began to withdraw from the SBC and form new networks; the most notable is the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF), which was founded in 1991. The following year, the SBC withdrew fellowship from Binkley Memorial Baptist Church in Chapel Hill and Pullen Memorial Baptist Church in Raleigh because those churches affirmed the homosexual lifestyle. By the mid-1990s, some Independent Baptists such as Jerry Falwell and David Jeremiah aligned with Southern Baptists because of the conservative shift. By 1998, every SBC ministry had come under conservative leadership and the battle had moved to the various state conventions. For example, the BSCNC increasingly came under conservative control from 1995–2005.

The seminaries were thoroughly transformed, especially Southeastern and Southern, which were the two most progressive seminaries. Southeastern’s trustees came under conservative control in 1987; Lewis Drummond was named president the following year. Following Drummond’s retirement in 1992, Paige Patterson became president, resulting in an exodus of progressive faculty members. During the 1990s, SEBTS grew dramatically and became known for its emphasis on evangelism, missions, and expositional preaching. In 1993, Albert Mohler became president of Southern Seminary; he moved that school into a more conservative and broadly Calvinistic direction. SBTS is now the second largest seminary in the world with over 4000 students and Mohler is probably the leading public intellectual in the SBC. Though generally more conservative that Southern and Southeastern, the other four seminaries have also become more consistently orthodox in recent years.

By 2000, the Convention’s paid and elected leadership was thoroughly conservative. This was perhaps best symbolized when the SBC revised the Baptist Faith and Message in 2000 to make it more consistently orthodox and evangelical. The revised BF&M was adopted by every Southern Baptist denominational ministry and many local churches (including FBC Durham). Every Southern Baptist missionary and seminary professor must affirm the BF&M 2000 as a condition of employment. Since the conclusion of the Conservative Resurgence, Southern Baptists have focused on expanding foreign missions efforts, planting new churches, advocating a biblical worldview in the public square, and providing an orthodox theological education to seminarians. Unfortunately, the SBC has also experiencing ongoing tensions over issues such as spiritual gifts, church polity, declining Cooperative Program receipts, and Calvinism.