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1894 Dallas Convention
Reduced Mission Debt

By Bill Pitts
For Baptist Press

When the Southern Baptist Convention last met in Dallas, in 1894, it was both colorful and significant. There were 755 "delegates" who were officially registered, but as many as 3000 people gathered in the massive Sam Jones Tabernacle for some of the services.

Political celebrities attended Gov. Hogg of Texas, former Gov. Fagle of Arkansas, and Gov. W. J. Northen of Georgia. Northen was the leading Baptist layman of Georgia, president of his state convention, president of the Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention and soon to be elected president of the Southern Baptist Convention.

The Dallas convention that year was held May 11-15. In the 1890's, the Southern Baptist Convention always met for a period of five days--from Friday to Tuesday--and the convention always began on the Friday before the second Sunday of May. On Friday, Saturday and Monday there were three sessions. Sunday was reserved for worship, and the final session convened Tuesday morning.

The convention's president was Jonathan Haralson.

Before 1900 it was customary for the convention president to serve for several years. Thus the convention had only three presidents in the period 1863-1898. (The tenure in the period 1899-1938 was usually three years, and since 1938 most of the presidents have served two years.)

P. H. Mell, Haralson's predecessor, had the longest presidency with 15 years, and Haralson himself served for 10 years (1887-98). Haralson was a layman. He practiced law in Alabama and in 1892 was appointed associate justice of the Alabama Supreme Court. He was greatly appreciated by the convention for his ability as a parliamentarian as well as for his spiritual stature.

The convention officially scheduled only one sermon. Professor F. H. Kerfoot of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary preached "a discourse of marvelous power," from John 16:7, "the coming and comfort of the holy spirit." The sermon lasted an hour.

The other sessions were not all business. It was customary for one of the three boards (Foreign Mission, Home Mission and Sunday School) to give a report, and then to have several men "speak to" the report. These were, in fact, occasions for inspiration as well as instruction.

Then, as now, the convention was important as a forum for working out problems that affected the local and cooperative work of the churches. One of the particularly thorny issues for the convention to consider was the problem of representation to the convention. A movement to reduce the number of delegates by constitutional amendment was agitated from 1892-1895, but it was not successful.

Another major area of concern was the convention's relations to other groups.

New Mexico and Oregon both asked to be admitted into the Southern Baptist Convention. The convention felt that it would be inexpedient to accept either petition.

There was also a communication for the Disciples of Christ Church to consider unification. This matter was referred to a committee for consideration. It came to nothing.

Another appeal was more fruitful. Relations with the Northern (now American) Baptist Convention had been poor during the post-Civil War days. There was no cooperation between Northern and Southern Baptists in their attempt to help the Negro Baptists.

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A committee of five was appointed (and met on Sept. 12, 1894) with the Home Missionary Society of the Northern Convention. After this meeting both groups were willing to cease the mutual antagonism they had engendered and to cooperate in their efforts to help their Negro brethren.

The Foreign Board reported a heavy debt of \$30,000. The panic of 1893 had been partly responsible for the debt, but the board's finance committee candidly pointed out failures within the churches which needed to be corrected.

They chided two states that kept 75 per cent of the people's donation to foreign missions for "expenses"! They also complained that churches ought to give regularly, rather than waiting until the last months of the year. This would help to avoid the necessity of borrowing and hence paying interest.

Finally, the committee suggested that "something should be done." It was. Two of the five collections taken during the convention went to foreign missions, and over half of the debt was liquidated at the convention.

The Foreign Board reported 94 missionaries in six countries; this report shamed "the largest Baptist convention in the world" (some 1,400,000 Baptists) for the comparatively small amount of work it was doing.

The Home Mission Board gave an enthusiastic report about its work among the Mexicans and Cubans. Likewise, the strong work among the Indians received special notice.

Several of the Indian leaders were themselves present. John Jumper, a chief of the Seminoles 75 years old, came to ask the convention not to cease caring for his people. He sang and prayed in his native tongue.

The Indian appeal was climaxed by W. J. Northen, president of the Home Board. He stood among the Indians on the platform and delivered an impressive address. He declared this was a noble moment, and that it thrilled him to speak on this occasion even more than when he had been privileged to introduce the president of the United States.

The Home Board also had its problems. Vast numbers of immigrants were concentrating in the large cities, and were not being reached. Moreover, the Negro had been sadly neglected. The board determined to make renewed efforts in both of these areas.

The Sunday School Board had been organized only three years before, but it was already receiving praise. The board was providing useful literature for the churches, and was already financially successful. Its profits were being used for benevolence and missions.

Youth groups were just springing up within some of the churches of the convention. There was no specific name for them nor pattern prescribed for them to follow. Some of the delegates opposed formal organization of what was to become the B. Y. P. U.

Far-sighted Lansing Burrows, recording secretary for the convention, spoke out in favor of the youth groups and most of the delegates recognized the potential importance of the groups. The convention commended the organization to the churches.

The youth groups should, they said, be directed by the local church. They should teach (1) the Bible, (2) Baptist history and doctrine, and (3) the work of the denomination. The convention suggested that the new publication, Young People's Leader, be used, and it encouraged the Sunday School Board to produce more literature as needed for the group.

The general impression of the 1894 convention was favorable on every hand. One reporter said that the weather was perfect, the audiences were large, the speeches inspiring and the debates lively.

Seventy-one years separate the first Dallas convention and the second one, the 1965 convention.