

By L. E. BARTON

At first the Southern Baptist Convention ^{organized 1845,} met only once in three years, and was commonly called "The Triennial Convention." As originally adopted Article III of the Constitution read as follows:

"Article III: A Triennial Convention shall consist of members, who contribute funds, or are delegated by religious bodies contributing funds, and the system of representation and terms of membership shall be as follows. viz: An annual contribution of one hundred dollars for three years next preceding the meeting, or the contribution of three hundred dollars at any time within said three years, shall entitle contributor to one representative; an annual contribution of two thousand dollars, as aforesaid, shall entitle the contributor to two representatives; and so, for each additional one hundred dollars, an additional delegate shall be allowed. Provided, however, that when application shall be made for the first time by bodies, or individuals, to be admitted into the Convention, one delegate shall be allowed for each one hundred dollars. And provided, also, that in case of great collateral societies, composed of representatives, receiving contributions from different parts of the country, the ratio of representation shall be one delegate for every thousand dollars, annually contributed for three years, as aforesaid; but the number of representatives shall never exceed five." That is the long paragraph which is given in the by-law on representation. The reader will notice that the basis of representation was wholly financial; also, that an individual could pay the amount required and come in as a delegate without even being a

church member, so far as the wording of the by-law was concerned, though we assume that it was taken for granted that only church members would be interested in being members of the Convention.

We note that while this long article starts out by saying: "A Triennial Convention shall consist of members," it continues by calling them "delegates" three times before the paragraph ends.

In 1888 the Constitution was amended as follows: "We recommend (a committee no doubt) that Article III of the Constitution be amended so as to read: 'The Convention shall consist (1) of brethren who contribute funds or are delegated by Baptist bodies, contributing funds for the regular work of the Convention on the basis of one delegate for every \$250.00 actually paid into the treasuries of the Boards during the fiscal year, ending the thirtieth day of April next preceding the meeting of the Convention.'". Here the word "delegate" is retained, and personal representation also is continued with the money basis still the sole basis.

In 1888 the Constitution reads: "of one representative from each of the District Associations which co-operate with the Convention, the representative to be elected and certified by the Association."

Dropping back to 1886, we find the brief Article III of the Constitution on representation to read as follows: "The Convention shall consist of brethren who contribute funds or are delegated by religious bodies contributing funds, on the basis of one delegate for every hundred dollars contributed to our work funds, and received by the treasuries of the Boards on or before the last day of April in the current year." That is still personal repre-

sentation, and a financial basis, which required the gift of one hundred dollars for one "delegate".

In Miami in 1946 a Committee of which L. E. Barton, Montgomery, Alabama, was Chairman, reported on revision of the Constitution. Article III reads as follows: "The Convention shall consist of messengers, who are members of Missionary Baptist Churches, co-operating with the Convention, as follows: 1. One messenger for each church contributing to the work of the Convention during the fiscal year preceding the annual meeting. 2. One additional messenger 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)."

The reader may see striking changes here. First, it becomes church representation, solely, with one for each contributing church, regardless of the amount. Then one additional messenger for each 250 members. Then the Church is given the alternative of one additional messenger for each \$250.00 contributed to the work of the Convention. Third, they are messengers not delegates. This puts the whole matter in the hands of the churches.

The evolutionary process described here has a history. So far as this writer knows, the question as to whether "delegate" or "messenger" should be used was never raised in the Convention until the Convention meeting in Hot Springs, Arkansas in 1900. Dr. J. B. Moody, who was pastor of the First Baptist Church of Hot Springs, very properly delivered the welcome address. With what some thought rather doubtful protocol, he made his speech on: "The Messengers of the Churches-The Glory of Christ." Moody was a very orthodox as well as

quite a dynamic man, who read books, specially on Baptist History, and wrote some. He was a debater and competent speaker, so he drew very clear distinction between "delegate" and "messenger". He rang the changes and hammered hard on the fact that "delegates" have authority to enact laws and enforce statutes, while messengers only carry a message and sit in council. He made it plain that Baptist churches cannot delegate their authority, and cannot abdicate their true church autonomy and let others make decisions for them. He showed how Baptists through the centuries have stood for individual rights and church autonomy and religious freedom, how they have honored the magistrate, but refused to submit to his unjust rule over the spirits of men. On the other hand he spoke of how councils, synods, and legislative bodies (of delegates) have enslaved men by violation of conscience, and have wrought ruin both to church and state. It was a strong address that compelled men to think. The Baptist papers wrote about it. I remember that Dr. Pitt (usually so correct in all matters of freedom) of the Religious Herald was rather sarcastic about Moody's inappropriateness both as to time and subject.

But Moody's efforts did not "waste their sweetness on the desert air". There was one young messenger there who was strongly impressed with the fact that Baptists cannot be delegates, bearing authorities of churches or any body else; and that thought was perhaps active in the mind of the young messenger at Hot Springs, when he wrote a revision of the Convention's Constitution at Miami in 1946.

There was an interesting change made in the Constitution in 1948. It had provided simply that any church giving \$250.00 to the Convention work could have one messenger. This played into the de-

signs of Frank Norris, whose church would pay the \$250.00 and send him as a messenger; and he, as the bitterest foe of the Convention, would do all he could to destroy its work. Section 59 of the Convention procedure in 1948 reads as follows: "L. E. Barton, Alabama, moved that Section 1 and 2 of Article III of the Constitution be amended to read as follows: 'One messenger from each regular Baptist Church, which is in friendly co-operation with this Convention and sympathetic with its purposes and work, and has during the fiscal year preceding been a bona fide contributor to the Convention's work. (2) One additional messenger from each 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'". This was adopted with overwhelming majority. I believe there was one negative vote.

This amendment sewed the matter up so that Norris, our chief enemy, could not send the \$250.00, put on a badge and take his seat as a messenger and do his worst, trying to destroy us. If Norris was ever in the Convention after that. I never saw him.

THE WOMAN'S WORK

The Woman's Missionary Union was organized in Richmond, Virginia, during the meeting of the Convention in 18⁸98. It was made auxiliary to the Convention from the first, and the women were completely loyal to the Convention and its work. I remember very well the enthusiasm of Mrs. Martin Ball, our pastor's wife, as she told us on her return from Richmond of the women's new organization; and also how she promoted the W. M. U. work in our church. But it must be said now with amusement that many of the "orthodox" brethren had serious doubts and trembled with trepidation, lest the women were going to run away with the churches and sell them down the river on "orthodoxy". And they

have done it on the orthodoxy of missions so that they now give almost as much to missions as the whole denomination apart from W. M. U. I have been Executive Secretary in two states, and never had more glorious helpers than the W. M. U. Societies. While many of the men at Richmond in 1888 were "doubting Thomases," the Convention "Recommended that the Convention and all its officers and appointees encourage the formation of Woman's Missionary Circles and Children's Bands in all our churches and Sunday schools for the double purpose of exciting interest in mission work and raising funds for the spread of the gospel." Much the same spirit was true about the Young People's work when it was begun. Many grown-ups were shy of it. For some while its annual meetings were held at the time of the Convention meeting, but not as an official part of the Convention. The same "offishness" was true about theological Seminaries in the old days, so that the Louisville Seminary was not founded by the Convention but by a band or association of individuals, who met during the Convention meeting. This no doubt explains the peculiarity of that Seminary's charter, which is different from the charters of the other Seminaries, which were written years after Southern Baptists were converted in favor of theological education. The Louisville Seminary Charter makes it a self-perpetuating institution, with the Convention nominating two persons for each vacancy on the Board and the Board's election of one of them.

There is no effort here to write the Constitutional history, or history of the Constitution of the Convention. The purpose at first was to bring out the history and difference in the uses of "delegate" and "messenger" in the Constitution. By the present studies, however, one is convinced that some competent, and diligent investigation might do a worthy work by covering the whole Constitutional field, and the effect the Constitutional growth and changes have had on the Convention's life. There could

be difference of opinion of course as to what brought about these Constitutional changes, but one believes that the hammer and tongs speech of Dr. J. B. Moody made as his welcome address to the Convention in May 1900 was the seed-sowing which grew through the years and resulted in the concept that Baptist general bodies are in no sense authoritarian, but organizations for co-operation of sovereign churches through messengers. It is not meant that churches surrendered their rights in the years agoe but that there was a clarity of conception and an evolution of statement through their Constitution that came to be more definitely understood.

It is not unfriendly or unjust to say that regardless of the wording of the Constitution, the notion still exists somewhat that Conventions hold now some authority over churches. That was evidenced by a Court decision in North Carolina when an erroneous ruling gave the property of a North Rocky Mount church to a minority instead of to the majority of the members because the church had formerly co-operated with the North Carolina Convention and with the Southern Baptist Convention. Like cases have arisen with churches in the National Baptist Convention, which reveal the erroneous dogma that Conventions have authority over churches. This notion is ecclesiasticism, which violates the independence of New Testament churches.