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May 13, 1991

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Moderates chart course for uncertain future

By Greg Warner

ATLANTA (ABP) — About 6,000 Southern Baptists who met last week in Atlanta charted a new course of denominational involvement, although they admit they don't know where that course will take them.

The participants gave themselves a name — Cooperative Baptist Fellowship — a constitution, a budget, and a plan to do missions together. But they repeatedly denied they had formed a new denomination.

John Hewett of North Carolina, who was elected moderator of the Fellowship, urged reporters after the May 9-11 meeting to avoid "easy answers" to the most-asked question.

"It's tempting to suggest that A plus B plus C equals a new denomination," warned Hewett, pastor of First Baptist Church of Asheville.

Even though Hewett and other moderate-conservatives say they have been systematically shut out of the Southern Baptist Convention by the ruling fundamental-conservatives, there was little sentiment among Fellowship participants to sever ties with the SBC.

"Personally I hope we can maintain a relationship within the Southern Baptist Convention and help return it to harmony with its heritage," said Ben Loring, pastor of First Baptist Church of Amarillo, Texas, and one of the speakers during the three-day convocation at the Omni arena.

The Fellowship was announced at a meeting held last August after moderate-conservatives lost their 12th straight bid for the SBC presidency, which has been the centerpiece in the denomination's conservative struggle to move the denomination in a more conservative direction.

The meeting in Atlanta, brought together a variety of organizations from moderate-conservative to fundamental-conservative, each with a different vision of a new strategy — one void of the fruitless political maneuvering of the past decade.

The movement gained momentum. Attendance at last week's meeting was double that of the meeting in Atlanta last August.

Still, many Southern Baptists and churches will identify with the fundamentalists. Only about 200 churches have contributed funds to the organization. But Atlanta pastor Daniel Vestal said the "embryonic" organization represents the sentiment of "hundreds of thousands" of Southern Baptists.

Vestal admits the Fellowship has not resolved the tension between those who want to launch a new denomination and those who prefer to stay put, functioning instead as a convention within the convention.

"The tension is real," said Vestal, who convened the first Fellowship last year after losing his second bid for the SBC presidency.

Vestal, pastor of Dunwoody Baptist Church, admitted there is a "legitimate difference" of opinion, even among the Fellowship's leaders, about how far to stray from the SBC fold. But he called the tension "healthy."

Likewise, Vestal voiced little concern over the occasionally feisty nature of Fellowship business sessions, during which participants debated at length some fine points of the group's new constitution.

"This is the first time in 12 years these people have been to a Baptist meeting where they can talk," he said. "Viva la chaos!"

Out of the chaos of last week emerged a detailed organizational structure, as outlined in the constitution and bylaws. Although debated thoroughly, the documents were approved overwhelmingly.

In an address to participants and the public, organizers cited three reasons for forming the Fellowship: a "policy of exclusion" practiced by fundamental-conservatives since 1979, the futility of further political activity, and "critical" theological differences with fundamental-conservatives.

Historian Walter Shurden, who presented the rationale, cited theological differences over the Bible,

5-13-91

ABP

Page 2

education, missions, pastoral leadership, the role of women, and the church.

The statement rejects inerrancy as a biblical doctrine: "The Bible neither claims nor reveals inerrancy as a Christian teaching."

"For these reasons we form the Fellowship," said Shurden, a professor at Mercer University. "This does not require that we sever ties with the old Southern Baptist Convention. It does give us another mission delivery system, one more like our understanding of what it means to be Baptist and what it means to do gospel."

Despite lingering uncertainty, there was little doubt at the end of last week's meeting that moderate-conservatives are bound for somewhere new.

In a closing speech, Hewett conceded it has seemed "at times" that moderate-conservatives were "on a train bound for glory but afraid to leave the station." But he added: "I need to say to you this morning this train IS bound for glory, and it IS leaving the station."

Other disenchanted Baptists will have a chance to board the train, he said, "but we can no longer hold it here until everyone's bags are packed."

Hewett and other speakers urged moderate-conservatives, battered from years of denominational conflict, to trade their fear and grief for trust in each other and hope in the future. It is time, they said, to let go of the past.

"Though many of us still grieve over the ongoing effects of the fundamentalist capture of the SBC," Hewett said, "I see a people who are no longer incapacitated by that grief. Our period of denominational mourning is drawing to a close."

Vestal, who chaired the interim steering committee that planned the meeting, said he has discovered "a great deal of fear among us." But, he noted, "we're not to act out of our fear...(but) out of faith."

Jim Johnson, pastor of First Baptist Church of Sarasota, Fla., said Baptists historically have responded "creatively and courageously" to new frontiers. "When Baptists have been required to do a new thing, they have been at their best," he said.

Loyalty to SBC institutions, long considered a hallmark of moderate-conservatives, in fact cost them their freedom, several speakers said.

Southern Baptists were in bondage to their institutions, which were "sucking the life out of us," said Lynda Weaver-Williams, a minister at Northminister Baptist Church in Richmond, Va.

"Freedom begins not when Pharoah lets us go but when we let Pharoah go," she said, retelling the story of Hebrew captivity in Egypt.

"When we can imagine life without Pharoah," she said, "when we can envision life without mega-institutional support, life without being the largest Protestant denomination in the U.S., then we can let Pharoah go."

In their search for success, Southern Baptists surrendered their freedom to a "centralized bureaucracy," said Nancy Ammerman, a Baptist sociologist and seminary professor at Emory University in Atlanta.

"We promised to build our churches, plan our programs, train our leaders, educate our youth, robe our choirs, tag our visitors and pray our prayers according to calendars and plans and handbooks that came from official church headquarters," she said. "The Pope should be so lucky!"

Ironically, Ammerman said, "it took a fundamentalist takeover of the denomination's institutions to show us just how completely we had already — voluntarily — given up our freedom."

She urged moderate-conservatives to reclaim their freedom by choosing new patterns of cooperation.

"If the Southern Baptist Convention can deprive you of your religious liberty," she said, "you have given the Southern Baptist Convention entirely too much power."

"Many of us have worshiped the denomination," charged Kenneth Chafin, pastor of Walnut Street Baptist Church in Louisville, Ky. Denominational institutions were transformed from dreams into idols, he said, by a preoccupation with "institutional survival."

Although moderate-conservatives have lost the battle for the SBC institutions, Chafin said, they must learn to dream again.

"While it may seem that today belongs to the power-broker," he concluded, "tomorrow always belongs to the dreamer."

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**Fellowship OKs constitution,
missions center, officers**

By Greg Warner

ATLANTA (ABP) — During the organizational meeting of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship May 9-11 in Atlanta, participants gave shape to what some observers say will become a new denomination.

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Fellowship participants approved a constitution and bylaws, elected officers and a Coordinating Council, passed a budget, formed a missions center and discussed the need for their own educational materials.

According to the organization's constitution and bylaws, membership in the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship will be open to all churches, institutions and individuals that contribute financially to the Baptist Cooperative Mission Program, the alternate-funding plan founded last August. No minimum contribution was established.

The BCMP reportedly has received contributions totally \$1.5 million so far. Contributors choose which of three funds their money will support.

The "Regular Plan" supports almost all Southern Baptist causes plus several other projects. The "Ventures Plan" eliminates support for several SBC causes and adds significant support for new mission ventures and Fellowship-favored projects. The "Vision 2000 Plan" eliminates almost all SBC causes and targets new mission ventures and Fellowship-favored projects almost exclusively.

Participants adopted a \$545,336 budget for the portion of contributions that will be spent on Fellowship causes. They also agreed to seek a merger of the Fellowship and BCMP as early as next year.

The Fellowship elected John Hewett, pastor of First Baptist Church of Asheville, N.C., as its first moderator. The office of moderator, which is limited to a one-year term, will alternate each year between clergy and laity.

Patricia Ayres, a laywoman from San Antonio, Texas, will be moderator-elect to succeed Hewett. She told reporters her election "speaks to the priority that this group is placing on women, laywomen, women clergy."

Bill Owen, a businessman from Ardmore, Okla., will serve as recorder.

The officers, who were suggested by a nominating committee and elected without opposition by Fellowship participants, also will serve as officers of the Coordinating Council, an 82-member body that will conduct the business of the Fellowship between annual general assemblies.

The Fellowship's bylaws require the membership of the Coordinating Council to be balanced between clergy and laity, and men and women, and to represent racial/ethnic diversity. More than half of the first council's 82 members are laypersons (47) and more than half are men (51). The council includes seven ordained women.

Except for the officers and nine at-large members, all members of the Coordinating Council were nominated by state and regional caucuses held during the Atlanta meeting. Each of the 14 states and four regions is allotted 3-to-6 members. Their nominees are subject to approval of the general assembly.

The council will organize itself into at least five "ministry groups," beginning with world missions, literature for Christian education, ethics and public policy, theological education, and equipping the laity.

Fellowship participants also formed a missions center. A \$507,000 budget was approved, authorizing funds for specific mission projects in the United States and overseas.

Although no action was taken, participants discussed the need for their own Sunday school curriculum and other Christian literature.

Reporting on those small-group discussions, Cecil Sherman, pastor of Broadway Baptist Church in Fort Worth, Texas, said Fellowship participants want to "recover autonomy in Christian education."

He said they want material that is relevant to life; exegetically correct; covers a broader range of subjects, including doctrine, ethics and missions; and provides more help for teachers.

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Fellowship lets moderates get on with task, Hewett says

By Norman Jameson

ATLANTA (ABP) — To view the formation of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship as the beginnings of a new denomination is "an extremely simplistic view of the option before us," according to the man elected as the organization's first moderator.

"Why does something new have to be just like something we're already doing?" asked John Hewett, pastor of First Baptist Church, Asheville, N.C., in an interview before he was to be nominated to lead the newly formed Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

Cooperative Baptist Fellowship officially constituted in Atlanta May 9-11 during a meeting of Southern Baptist moderate-conservatives.

Hewett was involved in the interim steering committee formed last August to sculpt a "fellowship" from a "feeling." He emphasized the Fellowship's formation is not a negative response to any exclusion members felt from the fundamental-conservative leadership of the Southern Baptist Convention.

more

5-13-91

ABP

Page 4

"It is a coalition of churches and individuals who are tired of fighting fundamentalism and who want to get on with the mission of the church," Hewett said.

"We're not here to send a signal to the SBC, or to try to press some advantage on the SBC, or to use this meeting as a lever to get something in return from the SBC," Hewett said. "We're ready to cooperate with other free Baptists and other Christians in the mission of the church."

Hewett said that mission has suffered while combatants waged political battles over the denomination's decision-making processes.

Asked why his group, if interested in cooperation, doesn't simply cooperate within the current SBC structure, Hewett said: "We're not welcome in the mission that used to embrace us. We're not trying to make our positive statement a negative statement about their future. That style of denominationalism will reach people that we won't reach. But we're

going to reach people for Christ that fundamentalists are not reaching."

Hewett said fundamentalism doesn't reach those who are "unafraid of higher education, who are not at odds with a modern, scientific world view, who are uncomfortable with authoritarianism, who are unwilling to participate in the subjugation of women, and who are unwilling to divide the world into foreign people and home people."

Hewett admitted theological differences existed between the moderate-conservatives and fundamental-conservatives from the very beginning of their 12-year battle. "The political moderates argued (there were not theological differences) because they felt that to admit theological differences was to invite massive defeat," he said. "Southern Baptists weren't willing to debate theology."

The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship is not interested in becoming a denomination, he said, "particularly if by denomination we mean a large, centralized, monolithic, unwieldy, unresponsive bureaucracy."

Hewett said it is "too narrow" to define the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship as a "group within the SBC," because not all fellowship members will remain within the SBC.

A church chooses how Baptist it will be at "100 levels," he said. While some churches will stop supporting SBC programs and agencies at one level, they may well increase support at another level.

He would not admit that any money funneled through the Fellowship would reduce the Southern Baptist Convention's massive Cooperative Program, with a \$160 million national budget and budgets at the state level that often exceed \$25 million. He said for every moderate church that redirects its giving, a "fundamentalist" church may increase giving.

"The operative word is choice," Hewett said of the options offered to Fellowship members. "Local autonomy is breaking out all over, and the freedom is exhilarating."

Southern Baptist churches always had the option to choose literature and levels of cooperation. But, Hewett said, the SBC structure no longer honors options. Choices are limited, he said, and he cited examples: the limited offerings at Baptist Book Stores, literature that appeals only to a "narrow strand" of Southern Baptists, and speakers on programs for pastors' conferences that all come from the same theological mindset.

Baptists within the Fellowship are "celebrating liberty," he said, "but we don't want to be independent. We want fellowship. We're going to do some things together we cannot do alone."

They will cooperate in theological education and producing Bible-teaching curriculum. The first literature offering begins Oct. 1. The Fellowship will begin a search for a full-time executive director immediately after the meeting, he said.

Hewett said he is "honored" to have been asked to be the first moderator of the organization.

"I'm humbled by the task and excited about the possibilities of working with some of the most faithful, committed Christians I've ever known," he said.

"The next 10 years are going to be among the most exciting years of our lives. They're certainly going to be more positive than the last 10 years."

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(Photos of the Fellowship meeting will be available from ABP later in the week upon request.)

Religious Liberty Council OKs bylaws, officer slate

By Larry Chesser

ATLANTA (ABP) — The Religious Liberty Council, a national organization formed primarily to support the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, approved during its May 10 annual meeting in Atlanta a constitution and bylaws, elected officers and named nine representatives to serve on the Baptist Joint Committee.

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The Baptist Joint Committee is a Washington-based religious liberty agency comprising 10 national Baptist bodies.

Elected as co-chairmen of the organization are former Southern Baptist Sunday School Board President Grady Cothen of Coral Springs, Fla., former Baylor University President Abner McCall of Waco, Texas, and Gardner Taylor, pastor emeritus of Concord Baptist Church in Brooklyn, N.Y. Jerry Martin, pastor of Kensington (Md.) Baptist Church, was elected secretary-treasurer. Elected to serve three-year terms on the BJC board are Sarah Frances Anders of Pineville, La., Homer Carter of Rockville, Md., and Patricia Ayres of San Antonio, Texas.

Members to serve two-year terms are John Wood of Waco, Texas, Jeanette Holt of Silver Spring, Md., and Greg Clements of Hampton, S.C.

Elected to one-year terms are Robert Wayne of Vinton, Va., James Ralph Scales of Winston-Salem, N.C., and Doug Watterson of Knoxville, Tenn.

In addition to serving as a support organization for the Baptist Joint Committee, the Religious Liberty Council functions as a transitional vehicle to provide representation on the Baptist Joint Committee for supportive state conventions, regions, cities, churches and other associations of Baptists.

Membership on the Baptist Joint Committee was granted to the Religious Liberty Council by the BJC board in October. The need for additional representation on the BJC board arose when a number of Southern Baptist state conventions, organizations and churches took steps to replace funding lost when the Southern Baptist Convention drastically reduced its annual allocation.

BJC board members elected May 10 by the RLC include representatives of state conventions and organizations, including the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and the Southern Baptist Alliance, that provide financial support for the BJC.

In a financial report, John Womble, director of denominational relations and development for the Baptist Joint Committee, told RLC members that most of the agency's fiscal 1991 budget has been pledged, but that cash flow still remains a problem.