

# **Why Southern Baptists Need the Trustee System**

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## Why Southern Baptists Need the Trustee System

### Introduction

On 4 June 1717, six English Particular Baptist churches, determined to provide greater educational opportunities to Particular Baptist ministers, created the Particular Baptist Fund. No single congregation exclusively benefited from the work of this entity, and no single congregation could accomplish its objectives alone; therefore, the Particular Baptists overcame their characteristic misgivings about extra-congregational institutions and created the Fund. Early beneficiaries of the Fund included William Carey, father of the modern missionary movement, and John Gill, Bible commentator and theologian.

When structuring the Fund, the churches decided to establish a board of trustees to oversee the fund's operations. In doing so, they were not unique in Christian history. Indeed, when structuring eleemosynary organizations, Christians worshipping in a wide variety of confessional backgrounds, residing in numerous locales, living during different centuries, and trying to accomplish myriad charitable aims have opted to empanel boards of trustees.

Its widespread popularity notwithstanding, the trustee system has faced periodic criticism from various individual Christians and Christian groups. The Southern Baptist Convention, an especially large and diverse organization structured according to the trustee system, has been among the more popular targets of criticisms in this vein. The principal claims of Baptist anti-trustee criticism are largely constant regardless of epoch or situation. Many of the criticisms highlight inherent dangers or weaknesses in the trustee system, yet the strengths of the system overwhelm these caveats. This paper will survey these criticisms, offer a response, and demonstrate the winsome attributes of the trustee system that have made it such a popular choice for Christians embarking upon grand ministry endeavors.

### The Southern Baptist Trustee Board System

Boards of trustees are one element of the multi-tiered structure of the Southern Baptist Convention. The most populous level of Southern Baptist polity contains the Southern Baptist churches. The next level consists of the Southern Baptist Convention, that is, the annual meeting. The method of accountability from the convention to the churches is *composition*: The Southern Baptist Convention is composed exclusively of messengers from the individual churches. The next level consists of the boards of trustees of the various convention-funded entities. The method of accountability from the trustees to the convention is *selection*: Only the convention messengers in session can select agency trustees, and the convention holds the exclusive power to remove a trustee from service. Thus, every trustee serves at the pleasure of the convention. The final level consists of the agency employees themselves. The method of accountability from the employees to the trustees is *direction*: The trustees have the exclusive authority to direct the activities of the various entity

employees. Even the *Baptist Faith and Message* is only binding upon convention entities through the action of and subject to the direction of each entity's trustees.

Neither individual Christians, nor individual churches, nor the convention as a whole may direct the convention agencies—that is the sole prerogative of the board of trustees. The convention messengers can communicate with boards of trustees, expressing opinions or making requests, but only the trustees may give binding direction to the agency employees. The trustees may not select their own replacements, nor may the agency heads nor the local churches usurp the convention's role in selection of trustees. The most powerful head of the most powerful agency of the convention cannot seat a single messenger in the annual meeting of the convention; only a church can exercise that authority. This division of authority and responsibility has a long history of serving the Southern Baptist people well.

The Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention serves as a limited interim fiduciary entity, acting for the convention messengers between annual meetings. Like the convention messengers, the Executive Committee communicates with the various boards of trustees. Unlike the messengers, the Executive Committee does not have the authority to alter the membership of the trustee boards. When Southern Baptists created the Executive Committee in 1917, they wished to make certain that the powerful new committee would not circumvent the trustee system. The By-Laws of the Southern Baptist Convention therefore contain a pointed prohibition against the usurpation of trustee power by the Executive Committee:

The Executive Committee shall not have authority to control or direct the several boards, entities, and institutions of the Convention. This is the responsibility of trustees elected by the Convention and accountable directly to the Convention.<sup>1</sup>

This entire arrangement may sound simple, but the realities of convention operation are often more complex. Agency employees are usually also members of local churches, and they frequently serve as messengers from their churches. Indeed, it is likely that a disproportionate number of messengers to the annual meeting work in some way for a denominational entity. Furthermore, the heads of Southern Baptist agencies are often far more recognizable and trusted figures to the convention messengers than are the trustees who govern them. Agency heads have ample opportunity to communicate directly with the convention messengers or even with the local churches, bypassing trustee accountability or even influencing the selection of trustees. Nevertheless, the ultimately insurmountable authority of the churches guarantees that no autocrat or cabal can securely wrest control of the system from the Baptist people. The system has proven itself sound, even if to do so it has had to withstand harsh attacks from detractors.

### **Are Trustee Boards Scriptural?**

Among the most lethal arrows in the anti-trustee quiver has been the challenge to show scriptural grounds for the structure. The force of the demand for scriptural precedent is strongest among people like Baptists who pride themselves upon their fidelity to the Bible. In

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<sup>1</sup>By-Laws of the Southern Baptist Convention, Article 18, Section E, Paragraph 9.

1910 the infamous Southern Baptist gadfly Benjamin M. Bogard<sup>2</sup> met I. N. Penick to debate whether the Southern Baptist Convention, together with its boards of trustees, had the right to exist. Bogard had recently led a large group of disaffected Southern Baptists out of the convention to form the early precursors of the American Baptist Association. The major framework of Bogard's argument consisted of seventy-six objections to the existence of the trustee-board structure of the Southern Baptist Convention. His opening salvo wasted no time in attacking the Convention's lack of explicit scriptural warrant:

1. My first reason [why the Southern Baptist Convention has no right to exist] is that there is no such organization...What agencies are [in Ephesians 3:10] represented? The church is the agent, not the convention. The Lord uses it as the agency and the individual ought to use it as the agency. The church is the thing through which God's wisdom and glory shall be made known.<sup>3</sup>

To answer Bogard's complaint plainly, there is no outright biblical command to set up boards of trustees, no indisputable list of qualifications for service as a trustee, and no description of a trustee's duties. Of course, neither is there explicit biblical warrant for the establishment of any of the entities which Southern Baptists govern through trustees—any more than there is biblical provenance for Sunday Schools, church custodians, or children's ministers. A Christian can consistently choose the path of Primitivism, but it leads to a relatively bare cupboard of options for creativity and flexibility in ministry.

Part and parcel of the choice to be Southern Baptist is the belief that, in at least some cases, scriptural imperatives can provide sufficient warrant for structures and methodologies that the scriptures themselves do not explicitly establish. The most prominent example is the Great Commission, in that Jesus gave the church the imperative of worldwide evangelism and discipleship. Other portions of the New Testament specify to the churches some of the details of implementation, but not all of them. Where the Bible does not stipulate to us the structure and methodology for our work, Southern Baptists have historically believed that the responsibility falls upon us, following the leadership of the Holy Spirit, to discover and instantiate whatever is necessary to propagate the gospel in the most powerful and efficient manner possible.

Southern Baptists have adopted the board structure primarily according to the preceding line of reasoning, and not in response to any overt biblical command. Nevertheless, even if the office of trustee is absent from the biblical text, the concept of a trustee is not entirely extrabiblical. At the heart of trusteeship lies the root principle of stewardship, an idea prominently spread across the pages of the Bible.

Two words in the New Testament portray to us the office of the steward: *ἐπίτροπος* and *οικονόμος*. These words appear in the New Testament in three distinct contexts. First,

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<sup>2</sup>Benjamin Bogard represents the anti-trustee position in this paper for three reasons. First, his work is so comprehensive as to include every major critique of the board system. Second, Bogard's writing is particularly strident and eloquent. Third, this author is particularly familiar with Bogard's work, having treated Bogard's movement in his doctoral dissertation. See Christopher Bart Barber, "The Bogard Schism: An Arkansas Baptist Agrarian Revolt" (Ph.D. diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2006).

<sup>3</sup>Benjamin Bogard, in I. N. Penick and Ben[jamin] M. Bogard, *Penick-Bogard Debate: The Rights and Liberties of Baptists*, transcribed by Sue White (Jackson, TN: McGowan-Merger, 1910), 29-30.

Jesus spoke of stewards and the concept of stewardship in His parables, commending to His followers the concept of good stewardship (e.g., Matthew 25:14-30), and in one case encouraging His disciples to learn a lesson from an unrighteous steward (Luke 16:1-9). Stewards were a prominent feature of life in the first-century Roman world—most households of any wealth or privilege employed a steward.<sup>4</sup> The role of the steward, managing vast resources for an owner, served as a fitting illustration for several of the lessons Jesus sought to teach.

Second, the Apostle Paul referred to himself as a steward by virtue of exceptional revelation he had received directly from Christ. In Ephesians 3:1-13, Paul indicates that “the mystery of Christ” had been entrusted to him, “the very least of all saints,” that he might disseminate in Christ’s service the glorious truth that “the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” It was the discharge of this fiduciary duty, according to Paul, that had landed him in prison.

Third, Paul wrote of a stewardship awarded to individual Christians as a part of the duties of office in a local church. Paul described the overseer as “God’s steward” (Titus 1:7, NASB), emphasizing the grave responsibility entrusted to the elders of the church. Describing himself, Cephas, and Apollos to the Corinthians, Paul was content to say, “Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God” (1 Corinthians 4:1, NASB). Paul then asserted a single test for judging stewardship: “In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy” (1 Corinthians 4:2, NASB).<sup>5</sup>

Stewardship is simply the act of entrusting one’s goods, rights, or duties to another person’s management. It is a concept described, applauded, and enjoined in the Bible. Service on a board of trustees is nothing more and nothing less than stewardship. The Bible does not command the specific establishment of boards of trustees to oversee missionary enterprises, the training of pastors, or the production of Christian literature. If churches may rightly cooperate with one another in such engagements (and Southern Baptists have concluded that they may), there are few arrangements more biblical than the selection of stewards (or trustees) to oversee and manage their cooperative work.

### **Are Trustee Boards Practical?**

6. *My sixth objection is because the Board plan is inexpedient.* Expedient means the best means to an end. The most expedient plan is the best, and hence we want to use expediency, and even if the convention were within the purview of scripture like the association, I would still favor the association plan, because we can do so much more work that way.

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<sup>4</sup> For example, one of the women who followed Jesus was “Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod’s steward.” (Luke 8:3a, NASB)

<sup>5</sup> John Hammett has mentioned stewardship in a discussion of the role of the elder/overseer/pastor, linking it with the function of oversight. John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2005), 164.

65. *My sixty-fifth objection is that the convention system has failed after a fair trial....*[Franklin H.] Kerfoot said [at the 1901 SBC Annual Meeting in Hot Springs, Arkansas] that [the Southern Baptist Convention] had failed. Now they are wanting us to work with a failure; Kerfoot said it was a failure.<sup>6</sup>

Of Bogard's seventy-six objections, very few attacked the efficiency of the board system. Efficiency of operation is the primary virtue of the trustee approach. The Southern Baptist system of trustee selection strikes a balance between efficiency and accountability, deftly navigating between the extremes of direct governance and executive governance. The practical advantages of the trustee system are manifold, but several merit specific consideration at this point.

First, the board system enables the separate existence of the entity apart from any other institution. Many of the individual churches present at the formation of our agencies are no longer in existence, yet the agencies continue in existence. Several of our agencies began their existence without any formal relationship with the Southern Baptist Convention. Southern Baptist Theological Seminary came into existence through the efforts of James Petigru Boyce, Basil Manly Jr., and a number of nineteenth-century Baptists who were passionate about seminary education for Baptists. The Southern Baptist Convention was unwilling to embrace the seminary as its own until well after others had founded it. Similar narratives describe the beginnings of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, most of Lifeway's precursor entities, and the vast host of our state Baptist colleges and universities. By empanelling boards of trustees, the founders of these institutions were able to establish structures that could function independently of other institutions while remaining accountable to their supporters.

Second, the board system frees the convention from the menial aspects of agency oversight. The annual meetings of the Southern Baptist Convention routinely register several thousand messengers. Because of the sheer scope of the meeting, the business sessions of the convention impose strict limitations upon both the time per speaker and the overall time available for the transaction of convention business. While wearing the shackles imposed by this format, the people of the Southern Baptist Convention must manage the intricacies of two missionary-sending agencies, six seminaries, and a collection of other entities. Frankly, the task is too complex for the forum. To present the necessary information for the messengers to make wise decisions, and then to allow the necessary time for discussion of all of the issues involved, would require an exponential expansion of the time allotted for convention business. The time is too precious to spend it deliberating upon the International Mission Board's vacation policy or selecting off-campus sites for Southeastern Seminary. Rather, the messengers of the convention set the broad vision of the convention and entrust the details of implementation to trustees.

Third, the board system provides for oversight of sensitive matters without compromising security or confidentiality. Each of our Southern Baptist agencies is large enough to face complex legal issues and personnel matters that our agencies must handle with discretion. The International Mission Board regularly deploys personnel to areas where the injudicious release of information about individual missionaries might endanger their mission and even their lives. The Southern Baptist Convention achieves oversight of these

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<sup>6</sup> Benjamin Bogard, in Penick and Bogard, 31, 136-37.

issues by selecting trustees who keep confidences on behalf of the institution while keeping watch on behalf of the messengers.

Fourth, the board system facilitates a more rapid response to emergent situations than could be possible under a system of direct governance. The Southern Baptist Convention meets once each year, but trustees are available to meet more frequently and provide interim guidance to Southern Baptist agencies. When key positions of agency executive leadership go vacant, or when unforeseen calamity arises, the flexibility of trustee governance enhances institutional efficiency.

These reasons and others commend the trustee board system to Southern Baptists. Indeed, how could a large network of autonomous congregational churches superintend the panoply of ministries that fall within the Southern Baptist Convention but for a system of delegated oversight similar to our trustee system? The trustee system is beyond practical; it is practically essential.

### **Are Trustee Boards Tyrannical?**

*2. My second objection to the very existence of the Convention is that the Convention and Board appoint missionaries and assign the fields of labor to them and control them in their work. You can read that in the minutes of the Southern Baptist Convention and every convention you may find on the face of the earth. Matt. 20:25-26: "But Jesus called them unto him and said, Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. But it shall not be so among you." No man, not even by contract, has a right to put himself under the control of other men, but missionaries are under the control of the Board, and in doing that, one man is put up above the other, which is a flat contradiction of the Lord's command that it shall not be so.*

*23. My twenty-third objection to the convention is that the system is a secret system, the real workings of which are kept hid from those who are expected to support it. I have a \$25.00 standing reward, and the first man that accepts it, gets it. In his magazine, J. A. Scarboro has offered \$25.00 for the names of missionaries working under the State Boards, where they work and how much they are paid, [sic] It is kept secret from the churches and mortal man doesn't know it today.*

*55. My fifty-fifth objection is that Baptist preachers are held in line by fear. Hundreds are afraid to break with the Convention, for fear of ministerial ruin. They have told me time and again that they are afraid to pull out, afraid their bread and butter would not come.<sup>7</sup>*

Benjamin Bogard alleged that the trustee-board system of the Southern Baptist Convention was abusive of Southern Baptist employees (missionaries), Southern Baptist churches, and Southern Baptist pastors. The complaint was a strategic one for Bogard, who had splintered the Arkansas Baptist State Convention—and eventually fragments of several

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<sup>7</sup> Benjamin Bogard, in Penick and Bogard, 30, 80-81, 123.

other state groups within the Southern Baptist Convention—by alleging dictatorial excess on the part of a putative Southern Baptist ruling elite class that supposedly controlled the boards of trustees. In the history of Baptists in America, no complaint has resonated better with grassroots Baptists than allegations of tyranny.

Each time that such complaints have arisen, the Southern Baptist Convention has survived, retaining the confidence of the majority of messengers that the board system is not tyrannical. Several arguments buttress the convention's claim.

First, boards of trustees facilitate greater involvement of Southern Baptist people than would otherwise be possible. The makeup of each board varies, but all of the Southern Baptist boards are relatively large. In fact, the trustee system distributes the agencies' policy-setting work as widely as is practical. Members from a variety of geographical areas populate the boards, guaranteeing involvement by Southern Baptists from across the convention. Apart from coming into the employ of a Southern Baptist agency, no avenue provides for greater involvement in Southern Baptist ministries than service as a trustee.

Second, boards of trustees are ultimately accountable to the messengers of the convention. If particularly disappointed with the actions of a particular board of trustees, the messengers to the Southern Baptist Convention always have the prerogative to unseat the entire board and replace it with new trustees of the messengers' choosing. Southern Baptist history demonstrates plainly that the voice of the people can prevail over any entity through the trustees—a principle evident as early as the Whitsett controversy (1899) and as recently as the Conservative Resurgence (1979 and following).

Third, the Southern Baptist agencies are dependent upon the churches for their continued funding. Although the agencies depend upon the Cooperative Program to varying degrees, none of them could survive without the robust pecuniary support of Southern Baptist churches. Since the legal relationship between the Southern Baptist Convention and the agencies prevents them from severing their ties with the convention and negotiating a funding relationship with another institution, and since no agency is able to control its own stream of funding from Southern Baptist churches, true tyranny from Southern Baptist trustees is quite unlikely.

In the last decade of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first, a disturbing trend has developed among the agencies of the various state conventions. Reaching a crisis point with Baylor University's self-appointments in 1991, many of these agencies, especially the colleges and universities, have begun to revoke unilaterally the right of messengers of the various state conventions to control the makeup of the boards of trustees that oversee the agencies. This trend represents nothing less than the mutation of the entities involved from Baptist organizations to something other.<sup>8</sup>

Such contravention of Baptist polity can only occur when multiple tiers of our polity fail simultaneously. The trustee tier has failed when trustees abandon conscience and wantonly grab power that rightfully belongs to the convention messengers who entrusted them with their positions. The messenger tier has failed when conventions succumb after the fact to the privateering actions of renegade trustees. The congregational tier has failed when congregations allow to go unchallenged decisions by the convention that so blatantly elevate

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<sup>8</sup> See Malcolm B. Yarnell, "Self-perpetuating trustee boards violate historic Baptist principles," *The Pathway* (28 October 2002, Convention Special Edition): 5-7. Yarnell's article carefully documents the variance between this recent practice and historic Baptist polity.

the interests of the institutions above the interests of the local churches. Indeed, it is only a short journey from self-perpetuating boards of trustees to despotic wresting of convention power from the messengers and the churches altogether.<sup>9</sup>

Where accountability to the churches has vanished, tyranny is indeed likely to flourish and institutional actions are likely to dishonor Christ. Thankfully, such is not the case with the Southern Baptist Convention and its entities, for they remain responsible to the churches.

The trustee system as practiced by Southern Baptists is not tyrannical; however, neither is it whimsical. The system is deliberately deliberate. An instantaneously responsive trustee system would inject unhealthy chaos into the mechanisms of Southern Baptist ministry. The lag of trustee response provides safeguards for Southern Baptist polity.

First, the system safeguards the institutions from hasty decisions. The Southern Baptist Convention, through its entities, deals with many issues that are both technically arcane and emotionally volatile. The democratic polity of the SBC enables any messenger to bring to the floor of the annual meeting the details of his knee-replacement surgery in order to dispute Guidestone's insurance coverage decisions. Any disgruntled agency employee can get messenger credentials from a local church and take petty gripes to the floor of the convention to seek public satisfaction. The ability for any individual Baptist to bring concerns directly to the messengers is one of the most precious treasures of Baptist polity. Baptist compassion will motivate the messengers to consider the needs of individuals; Baptist wisdom will motivate the messengers to exercise caution in building agency policy around isolated cases. The trustee system imposes a damper upon such decision-making, entrusting relevant messenger initiatives to trustee deliberation before the convention can make any determination.

Second, the trustee system eventuates an informal accountability of each annual meeting of the convention to the annual meetings that transpire before and after it. No quirky confluence of messengers can easily supplant the mission, doctrine, personnel, and policy of the Southern Baptist Convention in a single year. The people of the Southern Baptist Convention hold the authority to direct each agency along any course of action that they desire, but the course of action must be important enough and wise enough to hold the favor of the Southern Baptist people for several years before radical change can take place. Thus, the trustee system is both difficult to abuse from within by the development of entrenched power and difficult to abuse from without by the disingenuous fomentation of rebellion.

## **Conclusion**

The objections of critics are not altogether without merit. Southern Baptists have endured seasons of wasteful bureaucracy, criminal malfeasance, executive ineptitude, and theological heterodoxy in our 162 years of existence. Each episode has amounted to a failure of the Southern Baptist structure of trustee oversight. However, more often than not, trustee

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<sup>9</sup> Just fifteen years after the 1991 Baylor charter change, Baptist General Convention of Texas President Michael Bell successfully ruled out-of-order a motion from the floor at the 2006 annual meeting by arguing that the BGCT Executive Board held sole authority over the matter in question. Bell claimed that Executive Board action had "preempted action by the convention"—an unprecedented and unthinkable ruling in Baptist denominational life. See Gregory Tomlin, "Motion on Criminal Probe Ruled Out of Order at BGCT," *Baptist Press* (14 November 2006).

oversight also provided the solution to these problems and, through wise stewardship in personnel and policies, solved many problems before they ever arose. And when the trustees were unable or unwilling to solve the problems, the churches have exercised their prerogative to appoint trustees through the democratic process to address them appropriately.

Any system populated by sinful people is prone to failure. However, abuse of the trustee system is no more prominent than the abuse of congregationalism that may take place when scandal rocks local churches, and no true Baptist would argue for the dismissal of the biblical system of congregationalism simply because it may have been abused. (Again, more often than not, the system of congregational governance has adequately—even superbly—solved the problems that have arisen.) Moreover, abuse of the trustee system is certainly no more prominent than what occurs in those systems of governance where autocrats manage to divorce themselves from accountability to God’s people. Even philosophers have recognized that some form of democratic polity, though it is problematic, is less problematic than the alternatives of aristocracy and tyranny.<sup>10</sup> Although abuse is possible under the democratic trustee system, the potential for abuse is as bad or worse under any other system imaginable.

The greatest commendation for the trustee-board system is the fact that it has facilitated so much good work for the kingdom of God on such a large scale for so long with so little trouble (comparatively). I. N. Penick drew his defense of the Southern Baptist Convention’s structure to a close by reciting the long litany of missionary boards, educational institutions, and charitable enterprises that had flourished and had harnessed the labors of faithful Southern Baptists through 1910. Nearly a century later, we can affirm that the system still works today as well as it did then. Penick concluded, “I am standing with the Baptists who are doing the work.”<sup>11</sup> The trustee system works well for Southern Baptists, and Southern Baptists work well through it.

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<sup>10</sup> Literally, democracy is “the most moderate of the deviations” of ideal constitutional forms. Aristotle, *The Politics*, transl. T.A. Sinclair (New York: Penguin, 1992), 239.

<sup>11</sup> I. N. Penick, in Penick and Bogard, 152.

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