

Southern Baptist Church

(Name)

(Institutional Affiliation)

### Southern Baptist

When it comes to American religious organizations, denominations characterize a congregation. They had served as the embodiment of their own set of notions such as “volunteerism, pragmatism, utilitarianism, individualism, populism, democracy, and even laissez-faire—that define the American character” (Farnsley, 1994, p. ix). Changes in the “denominational landscape” translate to changes in religious ideas and organizations (Farnsley, 1994). It manifests the internal order of a local church or an entire congregation. It also points out significant cultural themes that affect the secular culture (Farnsley, 1994).

The changes in the structure of denominations in the church also reflect a transfer in power and leadership, specifically with what happened with the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) (Farnsley, 1994). Since SBC represents the largest American Protestant denomination, a shift in their configuration is noteworthy. Controversies about the SBC had generated a number of literature regarding religious disputes that had attracted secular publicity (Farnsley, 1994). Even the annual meeting of the congregation in 1989 attracted media attention as major wire services and local press flocked to publicize the gathering (Farnsley, 1994). There were ideological and theological dispute within the organization that claimed to have 15,000,000 members that created the media hype (Farnsley, 1994).

It was clear that its members splitting currently showed no hopes of making SBC back to the way it was before (Farnsley, 1994). The basic plot of the SBC conflict involved the religious conservatives known as the fundamentalists who “wrested control of the denomination's hierarchy and bureaucracy” and the moderate faction who had been the underdogs for many years (Farnsley, 1994, p. x). Such difference in perceptions can be rooted from the influence of American modernity and liberalism. The questions that separated the Southern Baptists from most of the Baptists were: “Should the denomination employ non-inerrantists? Should the seminaries teach historical-critical method? Should

mission funds be spent on education and health as well as on evangelism? Should the opinions of a minority in the denomination be considered when making policy decisions and to what degree?" (Farnsley, 1994, p. xi)

### **Historical Overview**

The Baptist denomination holds a distinctive belief that regards membership through the ordinance of baptism (The Columbia Encyclopedia, 2004). Traced back to 1644, it was a denomination joined by those who believed that baptism was to be administered to no one but believers and that immersion was the only way to administer baptism according to the New Testament (The Columbia Encyclopedia, 2004).

The group of English separatists led by John Smyth in Holland, under the Mennonite influence, formed the first English Baptist congregation in 1608 in Amsterdam (The Columbia Encyclopedia, 2004). Smyth baptized himself first and repeated the same ritual with others (The Columbia Encyclopedia, 2004). It was known as the first church to be General Baptists as they held the Armenian belief that Jesus' atonement was for everyone and not for the elect only (The Columbia Encyclopedia, 2004).

Decades after, in 1633, the Particular Baptists came into the picture under the Calvinistic doctrine that Jesus' atonement was for certain selected people (The Columbia Encyclopedia, 2004). In 1644, Particular Baptists required a confession of faith in the form of a baptism. General and Particular Baptists were collectively known as the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland (The Columbia Encyclopedia, 2004).

In the United States of America, it was the Particular Baptists that first gained popularity among the Puritans and Calvinists, especially when Roger Williams rejected infant baptism and established in 1639 that the individual profession of faith was required (The Columbia Encyclopedia, 2004). There were groups of Baptists who settled in Maine to Charleston, SC as well as in Sandy Creek, NC (The Columbia Encyclopedia, 2004).

There were Baptist movements such as the American Baptist Missionary Union that was formed to extend the religion in the continent and everywhere else (The Columbia Encyclopedia 2004). The question of slavery created the dividing wall that created the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) in 1845 (The Columbia Encyclopedia 2004).

In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the SBC was involved in a controversy about the struggle between the fundamentalist and the moderate parties for the control of the convention (Wills, 1997). The victory of the fundamentalist was a surprise as most Southern Baptists were Protestant moderates; however, “fundamentalist exclusivism seemed to cut against the grain of Southern Baptist exclusivism” (Will, 1997, p. 3). They ascribe to a conservative theology that believed that the bible was divinely inspired, the supernatural is real, eternity in hell exists, and spiritual rebirth was necessary and that they had an obligation to the lost (Will, 1997).

Most of them also practiced tolerance. Believer priesthood and the liberty of the soul were near the center of the Southern Baptist theology (Will, 1997). They believed that each person had the freedom to embrace Christianity in accordance to his/her individual judgment and that churches should be able to tolerate diverse judgments (Will, 1997). The moderate party had this freedom as its banner and counted on the Baptist tradition of individualism to influence people (Will, 1997).

Moderate and conservative sides had the banner of evangelism as their top priority. However, it was during the height of evangelism when the controversy of the conflict of decisions came out (Will, 1997). Fundamentalists claimed that the churches must be committed to the inerrancy and that they were the ones who were blessed because of the growth of their numbers of baptisms (Will, 1997). For the moderates, the discord brought about by such inerrancy crusaders actually caused more distraction for the churches instead of focusing on evangelism (Will, 1997).

Such a struggle brought about the confusion of the identity of the Southern Baptist denomination (Will, 1997). However, it seemed that the fundamentalist position was stronger than what the moderates expected as the powerful influence of the religious authority of the southern traditions still prevailed (Will, 1997). It was the “heritage of exclusivism” that prevailed of the modernity of individualism (Will, 1997, p. 4). Orthodox belief was still perceived as the intrinsic concept of Christian identity (Will, 1997).

The Southern Baptist convention was formed from English Puritanism (Will, 1997). It was during the time of the Great Awakening that Baptist churches multiplied: starting from 60 congregations, they reached thousands in 1790 since 1740 (Will, 1997). The first actual identifiable Baptist church in the southern area was in Charleston, South Carolina, when Particular Baptists migrated from Maine in the year 1696 (Will, 1997). The Philadelphia Baptist Association also went to the South with evangelists Morgan Edwards and John Gano (Will, 1997).

By 1790, there were 67,000 members under the Baptist congregation in the United States while the South was represented by 41, 000 members, accounting for 61 percent of the Baptists in the country (Will, 1997). Most of them were in Virginia and Georgia. By 1906, there was one in every four Georgian who was Baptist. This showed Georgia to be the most Baptist state (Will, 1997). They reached 596,310 white and black Georgia Baptists (Will, 1997).

Georgia Baptist church placed discipline as the important factor in church life as seen from their attendance in monthly conference meetings regarding disciplinary matters and the presence of a “bench of judges” in the church. The practice of discipline and their disciplined democracies were even more important than preaching the gospel (Will, 1997). They believed that discipline would enable them to reach the nation because they believed that “God rewarded faithful pruning by raining down revival” (Will, 1997, p. 8).

Even if Southern Baptist conservatives overpowered the moderates, these churches still showed signs of progressive and modern agendas. In the 1920s, church discipline disappeared for Southern Baptists (Will, 1997). It was the start of democratic religion taking a new and more concrete shape (Will, 1997).

### **Southern Baptist Convention**

#### **Membership**

The Southern Baptist Convention has over 16 million members. However, there seemed to be no single source of authority that existed for the Southern Baptist congregation because there were a number of Southern Baptist churches and no Southern Baptist Church (Hadaway, 1989). Membership then has implied that the congregation adopted theology and practice that was accepted by other Southern Baptist churches (Hadaway, 1989). The minimum level of acceptability was something that was very difficult to determine.

“Disfellowship” took place for the church that employed women pastorship, ordination of women deacons, condoning “speaking in tongues”, holding of healing services, teaching heresy, and other crimes and misdemeanors (Hadaway, 1989, p. 150).

Saying one person is Southern Baptist represents a cultural statement (Jones, 2002). It was difficult to break ties with such a declaration. In local churches, they have their own programs and denominations are not as important as before (Jones, 2002).

#### **Organization Description**

There had been cases wherein the church can be voted out for a year and return the next because they fix the cause of their expulsion or when the association actually changed its own sentiments (Hadaway, 1989).

Baptist churches are considered to be congregational in terms of governance (The Columbia Encyclopedia, 2004). General association then cannot have control over the local individual churches. The autonomy of the local church meant the churches can operate and

decide what they want to do and the denominational leader can only suggest, appeal, or plead with the local pastors (Hadaway, 1989).

A church is free to join any association or convention as it pleases (Hadaway, 1989). It is also possible for the local church to switch associations. Proximity usually decides the association or convention (Hadaway, 1989). However, conflicts with the association can push churches to change associations (Hadaway, 1989).

### **Status of Religion in the US**

The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) turned into fragments of different groups as moderate Baptists and conservative ones still struggled to resolve their conflicts (Jones, 2002). Difficulties were encountered as they strived to consolidate forces to form a full-fledged national denomination and provided compelling alternatives to the conservatism of the convention (Jones, 2002). In a general assembly of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, moderates gathered to discuss such a consolidation. The moderates have broken association with the Southern Baptist Convention for more than a decade after the Baptist “holy war” in the 1980s by conservatives who were determined to enforce that the Bible was historically, scientifically and theologically inerrant (Jones, 2002).

However, some local church leaders did not want a denomination for the moderates who split from the Southern Baptist Convention. Most still feel that SBC was in their DNA and were not going to cut all ties with it even as disagreements occurred (Jones, 2002). They were different in their views concerning the role of women in the ministry and rejected the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message Statement that prohibited women from being senior pastors and that the wives must submit to the servant leadership of their husbands (Jones, 2002). Even as the remaining SBC members criticized them, they would just say that it was who they were and that was what they believed in (Jones, 2002).

There were also regional bias that existed especially from the people from Mississippi, Texas, and Oklahoma that made the division more real (Jones, 2002). Consolidation was still far-fetched because of the mentality that they had a tradition of solving their own problems (Jones, 2002). The Baptist conflict was divided into three periods: the struggle for national control in 1979 to 1990, the fight over state conventions in 1990 to 2000, and now the bitter battles between local churches from 2000 to present (Jones, 2002). They recognized that it had to take decades more for the split to be gestated; however, there was progress toward that (Jones, 2002).

### **Beliefs and Worldviews**

General Baptists had rejected the Calvinist doctrine of the existence of a limited atonement, wherein Christ died only for the elect and favored unconditional election (Wills, 1997). In the 1640s, the Particular Baptists rejected any notion that Christ died for all the people rather than dying for a few who had been chosen from all eternity (Wills, 1997). Most Baptist disciplines adhered to the evangelical exclusivist temperament that insisted that the church was separated from the world and established purity (Wills, 1997). Ecclesiastical authority ensured such pure beliefs. When someone would promote erroneous beliefs, they would be excluded from the church as they linked church discipline to sound belief (Wills, 1997).

Southern Baptists held on to an orthodox dogma (Wills, 1997). They believed that the church's duty was to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ to gain supernatural regeneration, salvation of lost souls, and to require doctrinal purity (Wills, 1997). Orthodoxy for Baptists provided for them the foundation of morality that qualifies them to be called the "church of Christ" (Wills, 1997).

They saw that they needed to be patient with their members but not when it came to error as they lead to immorality and damnation (Wills, 1997). They saw the importance of correct theology as it was the key to salvation (Wills, 1997). Difference in doctrine actually caused schisms.

There was a time when members were disgruntled for being charged with heresy because they believed Andrew Fuller's general provision approach to the doctrine of believing (Wills, 1997). Baptist laypeople were actually willing to break fellowship over doctrine or whether doctrines should be considered heretical (Wills, 1997). They defended exclusiveness as a doctrine even if it was unpopular. The Baptists believed that the hand of the apostles held Christianity in an intense exclusivity (Wills, 1997). They were more inclined toward demanding for more focus to the exclusivity of Christianity because they felt that everyone should hold to it as a doctrine. They insist on unanimity because it was as a major factor for fellowship (Wills, 1997). According to them, the Old Testament has stated how two cannot walk together when they did not agree (Wills, 1997).

Generally, the Southern Baptist Convention has a boycott of Disney. They published prayer guides that targeted Jews, Muslims, and Hindus for conversion on their holy days and adopted the faith statement that women should not be pastors and that wives should submit to their husbands (Jones, 2002).

### **American Culture and the Southern Baptist Convention**

#### **Relationship**

The transformation of the Southern Baptist Convention adopted individualist trends that created new forms of individualism in local churches as influenced by the American culture (Wills, 1997). The nature of individualism was seen as changing, and it played a huge role in the transformation the American evangelism (Wills, 1997).

There was a time when the evangelicalism of American Protestantism was in a pursuit of a pure and primitive church (Wills, 1997). The 21<sup>st</sup> century American evangelicalism was for the promotion of individual spirituality that resulted to loosely connected institutional churches (Wills, 1997). Evangelicals let go of the belief of the divine mandate to establish pure churches. The kingdom was within, and individual piety called for no mediation of the ecclesiastical institutions (Wills, 1997).

The heritage of democratic authority of the Southern Baptist Convention was considered part of the larger story of transformation in the Western culture. Modernity from the secular culture placed importance in the individuality of the social and intellectual aspect of the people (Wills, 1997). Most Southern Baptists resisted this change.

However, it did not mean that they did not embrace individualism as people had inalienable human rights and had the power to exercise their faith individually (Wills, 1997). Southern Baptists were latecomers when it came to certain aspects of modernity; they felt that human reason was prone to error; therefore, truth and morality must be entrusted to the congregation rather than the individual (Wills, 1997).

Democracy, bureaucracy, charisma, and individual autonomy were characteristics necessary for an American denomination (Farnsley, 1994). The church adopted certain models that were actually borrowed from the secular political environment that created a unique American Baptist denomination (Farnsley, 1994). American religion was expected to be “individualistic” and “popular”; sometimes, it can even be “political” (Farnsely, 1994). It was styled as a religion that is democratic and republican (Farnsely, 1994).

The conflict that SBC experienced involved theological dispute, division between socioeconomic classes, clashes of cultures, and a reaction to modern ideas that pushed for change and progress (Farnsely, 1994). The bottom line of those was really pluralism because

it dealt with plurality of theological beliefs, social classes, and cultural assumptions (Farnsely, 1994).

### **Development Factor**

America was in a “post-denominational” era wherein looser network structure or the lack of a consolidating denomination was more attractive for local churches (Jones, 2002). It did not see the need to come under one controlling denomination. This greatly affected any chance they were looking for toward a Baptist denomination, as a Baptist moderate denomination, or as unified Baptist denomination.

The SBC had decidedly American values of liberal ideas, individualism, pragmatism, and democracy that were founded in the congregation’s polity even when it was birthed as a conservative church (Farnsely, 1994). Competing interests appeared as a dominant mode of conflict in America as seen with SBC: theirs were linked to ideology, region, culture, and the nature of the organization that needed models for decision making that were popular, liberal, and democratic (Farnsley, 1994).

It followed a certain procedure that reflects that “the spirit of politics infused into every corner of American Life” (Farnsely, 1994, p. 143). This was reflected in the operations of SBC as well. There was a need to recognize the importance of politics in the controversies and conflict that occurred for the Southern Baptist Church; however, they failed to appreciate the importance of conflicting opinions for the path toward finding the best policy that should be adopted in their congregation (Farnsley, 1994).

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