A Survey of 175 Years
of Southern Baptist Resolutions

Bill Konyk

Abstract: *This essay is a survey of the resolutions adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention at its yearly meetings from 1845 through 2020. Analysis was aided by identifying topics using the machine learning algorithm Non-negative Matrix Factorization. General trends, shifts in language, and other interesting features are presented. Overarching themes are identified and supported using numerical data and statements from the Southern Baptist Convention, demonstrating several significant shifts in the functioning and focus of the organization. This includes a transition from focusing on missions to engaging with culture, a functional move to a representative form of governance, and prioritizing unity in belief over functional cooperation in missions.*

Key Words: *convention, culture, entities, history, missions, polity, resolution, resurgence, SBC, technology*

The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) is by far the largest protestant, Christian organization in the United States today. While it is technically a voluntary association of churches, the influence of what is effectively a denomination is widespread. Its all-time maximum size included 16.3 million members in 2006,[1] which corresponds to roughly five percent of the US adult population.[2] The SBC is one of the oldest Christian entities in America, reaching 175 years of age in 2020. Because of its size and longevity, it carries significant weight in Evangelical culture, theology, and public engagement.

The SBC also has one other particular defining trait: when gathered together, its members tend to be opinionated. Since its inception the organization has adopted resolutions at each yearly convention. While the purpose of these resolutions has changed over time, they remain a witness of how an influential group of Christians believed they ought to address issues in the church and society. Given that political views are strongly correlated with worship choices in America,[3] the history of the SBC's public witness is particularly relevant.

In this work, a machine-augmented analysis of the SBC's resolutions will be presented, using data science techniques to identify topics and track their prevalence through time. Due to the nature of the algorithm employed, this work will identify broad shifts in the language of the resolutions, connecting them to statements and motivations given by SBC messengers at the convention's yearly meetings. What will be seen are several large-scale changes in the organization over its history, including a shift in focus from missions to cultural engagement, moving from a direct form of governance to a representative one, and basing unity in belief rather than cooperation in missions.

Background

The SBC was formed in 1845 for "the propagation of the Gospel." This missionary society was constituted as a loose association of churches, with the business of the organization being decided by messengers from said churches at a yearly convention.[4] It is when gathered at such meetings that resolutions are proposed, debated, and ultimately adopted. They have encouraged action in churches, commissioned committees, directed the work of the convention, engaged with political leaders, and stated the SBC's view on particular issues.

Resolutions stand out among all the reports and documents produced by the SBC because they are by nature intended for public dissemination and their adoption requires consensus. While resolutions are fundamentally non-binding, and the SBC itself holds no formal authority over the faith and practice of cooperating churches, they are heavily influenced by the priorities and posture of messengers present. Thus, by analyzing the content of resolutions, one can reasonably infer what topics many

---

[1] Kate Shellnutt, "Southern Baptists Drop 1.1 Million Members in Three Years" (Christianity Today, 12 May 2022), https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2022/may/southern-baptist-membership-decline-covid-pandemic-baptisms.html.

[2] Dalia Fahmy, "7 Facts About Southern Baptists" (Pew Research Center, 2019), https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/06/07/7-facts-about-southern-baptists/.

[3] Bob Smietana, "Many Churchgoers Want to Worship with People Who Share Their Politics" (Lifeway Research, 23 August 2018), https://research.lifeway.com/2018/08/23/many-churchgoers-want-to-worship-with-people-who-share-their-politics/; "Religious Landscape Study" (Pew Research Center, 2014), https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/religious-family/baptist-family-evangelical-trad/#social-and-political-views.

[4] *Annual of the 1845 Southern Baptist Convention* (Augusta, GA), 3. Note that the titles of the SBC Annuals have varied in style over the past 175 years. For consistency's sake, the modern title format will be used when referencing the proceedings from a particular SBC gathering, with the location of the convention being referenced in parentheses.

(though not all) of the local churches cooperating with the SBC have considered to be significant at various points in history. This provides a means of tracking the focus and priorities of the SBC through the decades.

The set of resolutions analyzed was built from the proceedings of the SBC's yearly gatherings, obtained from the Southern Baptist Historical Library[5] and the formatted resolutions hosted on the official SBC website.[6] While it would have been much simpler to use only the documents found on the SBC's website—as it is fairly straightforward to use web scraping tools to pull the data automatically—it turns out that a large number of resolutions adopted before 1930 are absent. This may be due to the fact that the process of adopting these statements has changed considerably throughout the SBC's history.

As of 2023, for a resolution to be considered for adoption it must be submitted to the Committee on Resolutions at least 15 days prior to the yearly meeting. If the committee believes it should be adopted, it is put to the convention as a whole and published in a specific section of that year's proceedings.[7] This process, however, is relatively recent. The committee was created in 1921, when the Committee on Arrangements proposed

> That a "Committee on Resolutions" be appointed by the "Committee on Committees" at the earliest moment in the session of the Convention…. to it shall be referred for consideration all resolutions except those offered by the Boards, and by the other committees of the Convention….[8]

Based on the proceedings, it appears that the Committee on Resolutions was not heavily used by the SBC until about 1950. Prior to this many resolutions were proposed, debated, and adopted on the floor of the convention. Others were accepted as a part of yearly reports written by the SBC's various committees. Additionally, in the early years of the SBC the resolution was often used for purely procedural matters such as adjourning for the day.

The evolving use of the resolution creates a certain amount of ambiguity regarding which ones should be compared. Any resolutions addressing mundane matters at the convention (such as motions to adjourn), procedural matters relating to existing committees, and yearly resolutions

---

[5] "SBC Annuals" (Southern Baptist Historical Library; Archives, 2022), http://www.sbhla.org/sbc_annuals/index.asp.

[6] "Resources in Resolutions" (Southern Baptist Convention, 2022), https://www.sbc.net/resource-library/resolutions/.

[7] *Annual of the 2022 Southern Baptist Convention* (Anaheim, CA), 20.

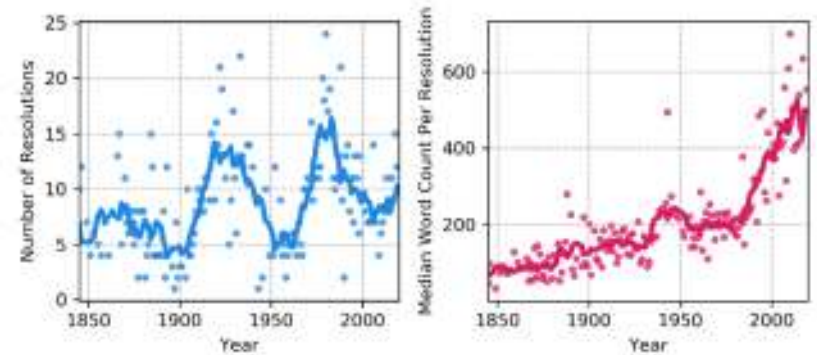[8] *Annual of the 1921 Southern Baptist Convention* (Chattanooga, TN), 37.

Figure 1: Left: The total number of resolutions adopted by the SBC per year. Right: The median word count per resolution by year. The dots represent raw values whereas the solid line represents a ten-year moving average.

thanking the host city or church were manually filtered out as they provide little insight into the SBC's position on any issue. Thus, while the SBC has adopted some 1669 resolutions between 1845 and 2020, only 1374 were used in this analysis.

Through the years the number of resolutions has varied considerably, reaching as high as 24 (1980) and as low as one (1987, 1943). Fig. 1 provides the total number of resolutions passed by year along with a ten-year moving average.[9] Looking at the trend, there are three distinct peaks around 1870, 1930, and 1980, separated by 50 and 60 years respectively. Interestingly, the number of resolutions has been increasing in recent years; if this trend continues, one would expect another flurry of resolutions around 2035.

While the number of resolutions has fluctuated significantly through the decades, it is very clear from Fig. 1 that the length of resolutions has increased consistently and, in recent years, substantially. In the 1800s resolutions tended to be very short, focusing on a particular topic or issue at hand and often omitting any sort of preamble that would provide context for the statement. Until 1985, the average length of the resolution increased at a relatively consistent pace. After that, resolutions became significantly more verbose, possibly beginning to level out around 2005.

---

[9] All plots will display a ten-year moving average rather than raw data. While this obscures the details of when individual resolutions were adopted, it is much more capable of identifying underlying trends and also accounts for the reality that most resolutions are the product of years of discussion or are adopted in response to long-term issues.

Methodology

In order to analyze the evolution of the SBC's resolutions data science techniques were applied to isolate topics within the texts. The specific machine-learning algorithm chosen was Non-negative Matrix Factorization (NMF), implemented and validated following research by Derek Greene.[10] Conceptually, the topic identification process involved converting each document into a list of words and weights. Next, mathematics were utilized to identify new lists of words that best describe all the documents. These new lists are referred to as topics because they consist of words tending to appear together.[11]

As an example, consider the top 50 words for one of the topics identified by NMF:

Abortion, Life, Human Life, Mother, Fetal, Sanctity Human, Unborn, Legislation, Far, Abortion Demand, Southern Baptist, Decision, View, Medical, Deal, Affirm, President Clinton, Practice, Prolife, Moral, Historically, Society, Tissue, State, Roe Wade, Biblical, Congress, Adopt, Attitude, Include, Pregnancy, Plan Parenthood, Policy, Supreme Court, Nontherapeutic, Health, Save, President, Selfish, Prohibit, Problem, Sanctity, Protect, Use, United State, Sacredness, Andor, Reaffirm, Federal, Birth Control

Clearly, this captures words most often associated with the SBC's treatment of abortion. If a resolution contains a significant number of words from this list, it is very unlikely that it would be referring to the SBC's boycott of Disney.[12] By comparing the words in the resolutions to the words in the topics one is then able to assign topics to each resolution.

The difficulty in using NMF is that it is an 'unsupervised' machine learning algorithm, meaning there is no known "truth." As a result, while NMF is excellent at identifying latent patterns in the documents, such as in the example above, it is unable to distinguish whether the patterns themselves are meaningful. Because of this, some numerical validation steps were employed to ensure that the topics identified were sound from a statistical perspective.[13] More importantly, the output was manually validated by comparing the top words in each topic with the documents that most heavily fit each topic.

This approach has two main advantages over a more traditional one. First, it can efficiently handle a large number of documents, comparing all resolutions simultaneously to each other. Second, the topics produced are arguably free from external bias, as the only source of information is the raw text of the resolutions themselves. Note that this claim only applies to the list of words produced by the algorithm; the moment a human assigns meaning or intent to the topic the potential for bias is reintroduced. Thus, this study is effectively machine-augmented; while the topics themselves and the trends were generated using a computer, the final analysis and interpretation still relies heavily on old-fashioned scholarly intuition.

Results

The primary result of this study is presented in Fig. 2, where one can see all the topics identified by NMF. The colored bars detail the percent of resolutions that fit each topic for a given year. This metric captures when a particular topic is most often observed and is largely insensitive to variations in the number or length of resolutions which, as seen in Fig. 1, can be significant.

Topic titles were assigned by identifying a common theme or concept among the topic's top words and resolutions most closely fitting the topic. If there is a '/' in the title it refers to two related, but separate concepts. For example, the topic *Prohibition / Moral Concern* primarily appears in resolutions related to the prohibition movement in America. Because resolutions addressing other social evils, like lynching and accidental death, use a very similar language, the title reflects both the main focus of the topic along with the more general language captured by NMF.

Note that the reduction of a resolution into a mathematical object means that this list is not exhaustive. Topics identified by NMF are separated primarily by the *distinctness* of language. This means that repeated phrases will tend to cause a particular concept or idea to be identified over others. For example, consider that in Fig. 2 there are no topics related to racism. The SBC has certainly addressed this; 17 resolutions contain the

---

[10] Mark Belford, Brian Mac Namee, and Derek Greene, "Stability of Topic Modeling via Matrix Factorization," *Expert Systems with Applications* 91 (2018): 158–59; Derek Greene and James P. Cross, "Exploring the Political Agenda of the European Parliament Using a Dynamic Topic Modeling Approach," *Political Analysis* 25 (2017): 77–94.

[11] A detailed description of the specific implementation is available upon request.

[12] *Annual of the 1997 Southern Baptist Convention* (Dallas, TX), 91–92.

[13] Derek O'Callaghan et al., "An Analysis of the Coherence of Descriptors in Topic Modeling," *Expert Systems with Applications* 42 (2015): 5645–57.
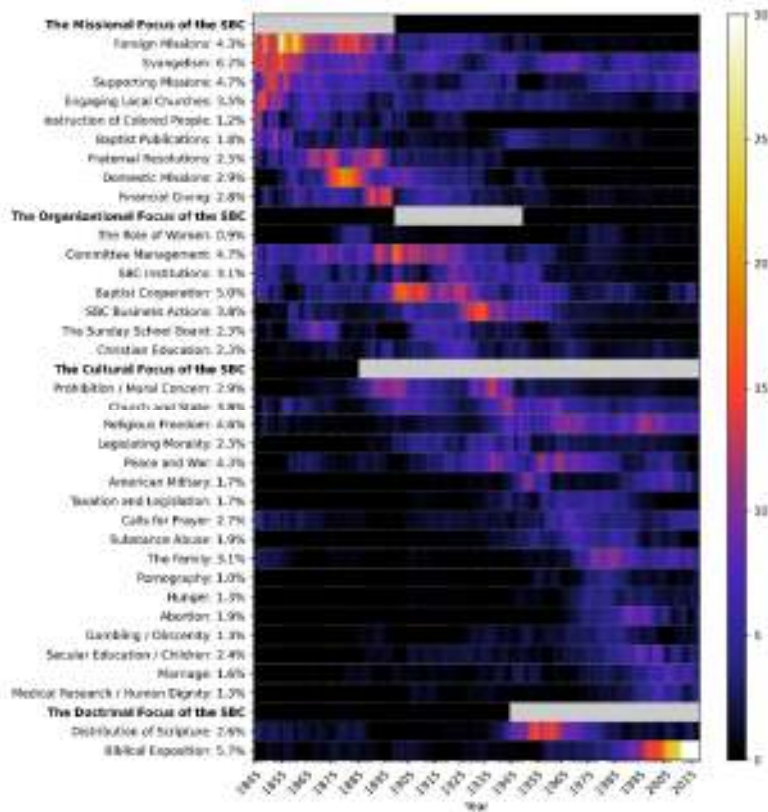
Figure 2: The percent of each topic assigned to all resolutions per year. The color assigned to each percent is shown in the bar on the right, with the maximum value being set to 30%. The percent displayed next to the title of each topic represent the topic's share of the total set of resolutions. The gray bars between sections represent the time periods of the different themes developed in this work. Values have been smoothed using a 10-year moving average.

word 'racism' (or some variant like 'racist') and in 1995, the SBC adopted "*Resolution No. 1 – On Racial Reconciliation on the 150h Anniversary of the Southern Baptist Convention*" in which messengers

> RESOLVED, that we apologize to all African-Americans for condoning and/or perpetuating individual and systemic racism in our lifetime; and we genuinely repent of racism of which we have been guilty, whether consciously (Psalm 19:13) or unconsciously (Leviticus 4:27); and

> Be it further RESOLVED, that we ask forgiveness from our African-American brothers and sisters, acknowledging that our own

healing is at stake;[14]

This was a very *significant* statement but because other issues were referenced more often, such as abortion (36 resolutions) or pornography (21 resolutions), NMF did not identify unique topics regarding the SBC's response to race relations in America. While this process was unable to capture the SBC's response to many specific, but important, issues, it excelled in identifying the broad evolution of language in the resolutions over the decades.

Some of the largest topics, commanding more than 4 percent of all resolutions, include *Evangelism* and *Biblical Exposition* (5.9%); *Baptist Cooperation* (5.1%); *Supporting Missions*, *Foreign Missions*, and *Religious Freedom* (4.6%); *Peace and War* (4.4%); and *Committee Management* (4.3%). Many topics relate to the functioning of the SBC's missionary and business processes, concentrated primarily in the first half of the SBC's history. The second half is dominated by topics addressing the moral and social evils on which messengers to the SBC most often chose to focus.

From the distribution of topics as presented in Fig. 2, it appears that there are four well-defined clusters of topics; indeed, the order of topics has been chosen to reflect this structure. When organized this way, it becomes clear that during the early years of the SBC messengers focused on adopting resolutions directly related to the missions and ministry activities of the church. From 1900 to 1950, there was an increase in topics related to the functioning of the SBC as an organization, effectively vanishing after 1960. Around 1900, the SBC began to address issues in society, a trend which has continued to the present. Finally, starting in 1945, there was a renewed call to distribute Scripture, followed in 1995 by the rather striking surge of the *Biblical Exposition* topic.

These four different clusters can be broadly ascribed to different focuses of the SBC throughout its history, defined by the following uses of the resolution:

- *Missions and Ministry*: directing missionary work, gathering financial support for ministries, and calling for prayer and evangelism
- *Internal SBC*: defining SBC policy, modifying polity, coordinating committees, and addressing other church bodies
- *Society and Culture*: providing positions on issues or organizations external to the SBC such as the government, global conflicts, or societal problems
- *Biblical Language*: references to the Bible or other Christian concepts and entities

---

[14] *Annual of the 1995 Southern Baptist Convention* (Atlanta, GA), 80.

As all these uses are differentiated by distinct language and terms, NMF is ideally suited to provide numerical context on how the focus of the SBC's resolutions varied over its 175-year history. This was accomplished by applying NMF a second time to summarize the topics themselves, giving a way to bin each resolution into one of the four uses listed above. The results of this analysis are displayed in Fig. 3 which shows, for all resolutions adopted by the SBC between 1845 and 2020, the total percent per year devoted to each of these different use cases.
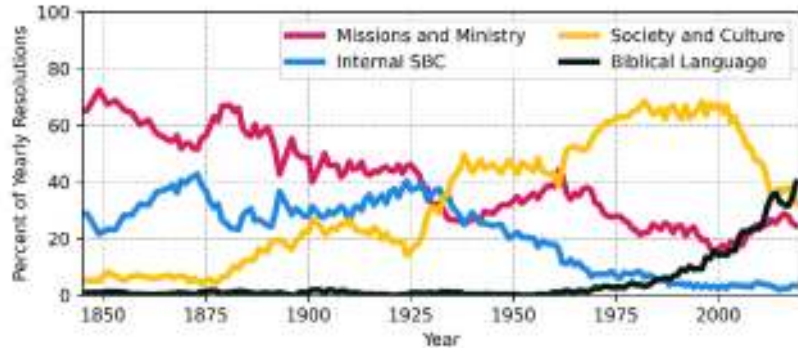

Figure 3: Figure 3 The percent of resolutions for each year captured by every focus. Note that values have been smoothed using a ten-year rolling average.

From this one can see that there is a general agreement between the most prominent topics in Fig. 2 and the focuses in Fig. 3, as the broad trends in Fig. 3 generally follow the clustering seen in Fig. 2. Interestingly, the SBC has adopted a surprisingly even number of resolutions in each focus. While *Society and Culture* holds a plurality at 34.5% of all resolutions, *Missions and Ministry*, *Internal SBC*, and *Biblical Language* are all close at 22.6 percent, 21.6 percent, and 21.4 percent respectively.

Both numerical analyses in Figs. 2 and 3 demonstrate that initially the SBC was almost exclusively focused on its missionary activity, a fact that is unsurprising given the circumstances of its founding. This changes around 1900 when, as the SBC enters a new century and continues to sustain significant numerical growth, the polity of the SBC and its own internal processes become the dominant focus of the resolution.

Around the same time, the SBC began to use the resolution to support the growing Prohibition movement. From this point, the *Society and Culture* focus begins to increase linearly until about 2005. In the 1970s, there was a significant increase in the use of Biblical Language. As resolutions highlighted a growing number of cultural and social issues, messengers began to regularly provide justification for their positions in terms of Scripture references and theological principles.

Finally, around 2005, one can see that a focus on *Biblical Language* begins to overtake the resolutions, surpassing all others. As will be shown, this is likely an artefact of the Conservative Resurgence, a movement within the SBC in which Baptists holding to a particular theological view of Scripture gained control of the organization.[15]

The following section will explore how these different focuses change throughout the years, providing context and details primarily from the SBC's yearly proceedings.

Discussion

The SBC as a Missions Organization: 1845–1900

The SBC was founded by Baptists primarily located in the American South in response to the refusal of its parent body, the General Missionary Convention (which included churches from the North and South), to appoint slave-holding missionaries. The precipitating event appears to be a declaration by a board of this ecumenical group that if "any one should offer himself as a missionary, having slaves, and should insist on retaining them as his property, we [the board] could not appoint him."[16] The messengers to the newly formed SBC were clear to point out that the issues leading to separation were not viewed through a moral or doctrinal lens:

> Let not the extent of this disunion be exaggerated. At the present time it involves only the Foreign and Domestic Missions of the denomination. Northern and Southern Baptists are still brethren. They differ in no article of the faith. They are guided by the same principles of gospel order.… We do not regard the rupture as extending to foundation principles, nor can we think that the great body of our Northern brethren will so regard it.[17]

As a result of the "usurpation of ecclesiastical power"[18] by the General Missionary Convention, many Baptists met in Georgia in 1845 and formed the Southern Baptist Convention. That the promotion of missionary activity was the primary stated goal of this body is evident in the purpose statement from the original constitution:

> It shall be the design of this Convention to promote Foreign and Domestic Missions, and other important objects connected with

---

15 Albert Mohler, "The Southern Baptist Reformation—a First-Hand Account" (Albert Mohler, 14 June 2006), https://albertmohler.com/2006/06/14/the-southern-baptist-reformation-a-first-hand-account.

16 *Annual of the 1845 Southern Baptist Convention* (Augusta, GA), 12.

17 *Annual of the 1845 Southern Baptist Convention* (Augusta, GA), 17.

18 *Annual of the 1845 Southern Baptist Convention* (Augusta, GA), 18.

the Redeemer's kingdom, and to combine for this purpose, such portions of the Baptist denomination in the United States, as may desire a general organization for Christian benevolence, which shall fully respect the independence and equal rights of the Churches.[19]

Considering the first cluster identified in Fig. 2, dominated by the *Foreign Missions*, *Domestic Missions*, and *Supporting Missions* topics, and reading through many of the resolutions in this time period (1845 and 1900), messengers largely used resolutions to direct the organization's missionary activity in both foreign and domestic settings. This included encouraging ongoing work and approving the expansion of missionary activity into new contexts. Such an ever-expanding front required significant resources, and the success of the SBC's missionary activity was dependent largely on continued contributions from its constituent churches. Thus, many resolutions in this period directly appealed to local churches to provide funds,[20] send personnel,[21] or to increase their engagement with the business of the convention,[22] These activities appear in Fig. 2 under the Engaging Local Churches topic.

Messengers also used the resolution for directing funds within the organization, authorizing transactions between various boards, and managing institutions such as seminaries, much of which is contained in the *Financial Giving* topic. Finally, many resolutions in the *Supporting Missions* topic capture the procedural and strategic decisions taken on behalf of the SBC's missionary activities.

Note that in the post-civil war period (1875 to 1890), one can see in Fig. 2 a large increase in the number of resolutions dedicated to *Domestic Missions*, correlating with the westward expansion of the United States. The significance of this migration was not lost on the SBC. Writing in 1878, the body adopted a resolution stating that it "cannot have, nor desire to have, any more important field than the vast region lying west of the Mississippi, into which a countless multitude of immigrants are pouring every year."[23]

Amidst this focus on missionary activity, messengers also adopted many resolutions exhorting the convention to provide for the religious *Instruction of Colored People*.[24] The motivation behind these resolutions was

---

[19] *Annual of the 1845 Southern Baptist Convention* (Augusta, GA), 3.
[20] *Annual of the 1853 Southern Baptist Convention* (Baltimore, MD), 10.
[21] *Annual of the 1857 Southern Baptist Convention* (Louisville, KY), 61.
[22] *Annual of the 1868 Southern Baptist Convention* (Baltimore, MD), 32.
[23] *Annual of the 1878 Southern Baptist Convention* (Nashville, TN), 36–37.
[24] While I fully recognize that the term "Colored People" is offensive, it is also the language employed by the SBC in its resolutions. I have chosen to use

clearly stated in 1849, when, in response to a "*Report on the instruction of colored people*," the SBC adopted the following.

Resolved, That, we regard the instruction of our colored population as a duty imperatively incumbent upon us as Southern Christians; that we regard the preaching of the word of God as the best means of discharging this duty and we earnestly recommend our churches to devote a stated portion of their public exercises to the particular instruction of colored persons in the truths of the Bible.[25]

Within the report, such instruction was motivated by the SBC's missionary call to be engaged in "giving the Gospel to the poor."[26] This topic, with language distinct and frequent enough for NMF to identify it, provides insight into how the SBC engaged with cultural issues in its early years. Between 1845 and 1890, there are very few resolutions addressing topics outside of missions and the working of the SBC. Messengers did not use their public voice to decry evils in society, remaining aloof from political and moral problems, responding only incidentally when considering how to direct the resources of the SBC. Overwhelmingly during this period resolutions adopted by the SBC stuck to the original, missionary goals of the organization.

The Mechanization of the SBC: 1900–1950

At the dawn of the twentieth century messengers began to more frequently adopt resolutions managing the SBC's committees, commissions, boards, and institutions. This trend is evident in Fig. 2, as the most prominent topics between 1900 and 1940 include *Committee Management*, *Baptist Cooperation*, and *SBC Business Actions*. Additionally, one can see in Fig. 3 the corresponding focus, *Internal SBC*, receives the largest share of resolutions between 1890 and 1935. This is likely a result of the increasing size and complexity of the SBC, leading messengers to approve structural changes that shuffled much of the business of the SBC away from the floor of the convention and thus out of the resolutions.

Within the resolutions adopted there appears to be an awareness that the SBC was not simply a small, isolated collection of individual churches but an entity with significant political and cultural influence. This is evidenced by the fact that, when lobbying external organizations, appeals were made to the ever-increasing number of Baptists represented by the

---

the historical language as a reminder of how significantly the attitude of the SBC has changed.
[25] *Annual of the 1849 Southern Baptist Convention* (Charleston, SC), 39.
[26] *Annual of the 1849 Southern Baptist Convention* (Charleston, SC), 39.

SBC. For example, in 1904, messengers claimed to represent "over a million and a half white Baptists in the South and a constituency of about five million people."[27] In 1917, as a response to World War I, they resolved "that we, the representatives of 2,744,000 Southern Baptists in convention assembled, pledge to our president and government, our prayers, our loyal and sacrificial support in the war in which we are engaged."[28] In 1940, when attempting to influence congressional legislation, they claimed "some five million members with a family attachment of some fifteen million persons."[29]

Along with consistent numerical growth, from the trends identified in Figs. 2 and 3 it appears that around 1900 messengers became less directly involved with the SBC's missionary activities and instead managed the SBC itself. This is particularly evident in Fig. 2, as between 1900 and 1935, most resolutions fall into the *Committee Management* and *Baptist Cooperation* topics. Each of these represents high-level actions taken by messengers to the SBC in directing the organization's resources, attention, and cooperation with external Baptist groups. Over time, however, this increasing reliance on committees appears to have led to some fatigue, exemplified in a 1937 resolution:

> Whereas, the multiplication of organizations is tending to mechanize our denominational life; and whereas, there is much overlapping and lost energy as a result of this excessive organization;
>
> be it Resolved, that the Southern Baptist Convention now in session appoint a committee whose duty it shall be to survey the situation with a view to coordinating and correlating the numerous units of our denominational work.[30]

Ultimately the need for effective bureaucracy led to the creation of two very influential structures: the Executive Committee and the Cooperative Program. The Executive Committee was proposed in 1916, when the SBC resolved to amend its by-laws to "create one strong Executive Board which shall direct all of the work and enterprises fostered and promoted by this Convention."[31] In 1917, this was implemented, and the committee was assigned several well-defined duties, the most significant being "To act for the Convention during the interim of its meetings on matters not otherwise provided for in its plans of work;" and "to act in an advisory way on matters of policy and cooperation arising between the

Boards of the Convention, but only on request of one or more of the Boards concerned." Both provided the group with significant powers to coordinate efforts within the SBC.[32]

In 1927, the SBC further expanded the role of the Executive Committee, designating it as the body responsible for concluding "all agreements with co-operating state agencies for the conduct of necessary arrangements as to handling of Southwide funds raised in the various states, and all other related matters." This enlargement was proposed by the Committee on Business Efficiency as a means to improve the functioning of the organization.[33]

Around the same time, the Cooperative Program was formed. It was intended to be, and to this day remains, the "primary means by which cooperating churches fund SBC missions and ministry entities."[34] While financial giving by churches and laity has always provided the SBC with income, in 1925, the Future Program Commission, in reporting on giving to the organization that year, appealed to the convention for a more organized financial strategy styled "The Co-Operative Program of Southern Baptists."[35] It primarily encouraged churches and individuals to regularly give to this program, prioritizing such contributions over one-time or designated gifts.

Both of these were celebrated nearly a century after their conception when, in 2017, messengers adopted a resolution commending "the Executive Committee for almost a century of promotion of the Cooperative Program and its faithful and continued partnership with Southern Baptist churches, SBC entities, associations, state conventions, ethnic minority fellowships, and other affinity groups," attributing significant success in missions and financial management to the group. The idea of pooling a large portion of the SBC's resources into one fund and then distributing it as needed was, in the eyes of these messengers highly successful. They also praised the Cooperative Program as "the most effective means of mobilizing our churches and extending our cooperative outreach into the twenty-first century."[36]

Given that by 1940, the Executive Committee had been successfully receiving and directing much of the SBC's funding, appointing its own special committees and coordinating activities between different SBC

---

[27] *Annual of the 1904 Southern Baptist Convention* (Nashville, TN), 40–41.

[28] *Annual of the 1917 Southern Baptist Convention* (New Orleans, LA), 32.

[29] *Annual of the 1940 Southern Baptist Convention* (Baltimore, MD), 127.

[30] *Annual of the 1937 Southern Baptist Convention* (New Orleans, LA), 89.

[31] *Annual of the 1916 Southern Baptist Convention* (Asheville, NC), 18.

[32] *Annual of the 1917 Southern Baptist Convention* (New Orleans, LA), 48.

[33] *Annual of the 1927 Southern Baptist Convention* (Louisville, KY), 67.

[34] "Cooperating with the Sbc, Faq" (Southern Baptist Convention, 2022), https://www.sbc.net/about/becoming-a-southern-baptist-church/faq/.

[35] *Annual of the 1925 Southern Baptist Convention* (Memphis, TN), 31.

[36] *Annual of the 2017 Southern Baptist Convention* (Phoenix, AZ), 87.

agencies, it is unsurprising that, as seen in Figs. 2 and 3, messengers ceased to adopt resolutions directing the work of the SBC's various components. Based on the sheer length of the proceedings, it appears that the convention's business continued at much the same pace, with the difference being that messengers were no longer involved in debating or approving the details.

This represents a very significant shift in the functional power that individual messengers, and by extension local congregations, held within the SBC. In the 1800s, messengers from local churches voted on and addressed specific questions regarding the missionary activity and funding of the SBC. Since the 1940s, messengers' primary means of controlling the direction of the SBC has been through voting for leaders. It is probable, then, that the observed changes in the resolutions between 1900 and 1940, seen in Figs. 2 and 3, represent a shift in the focus of the messengers from personally overseeing the SBC's work to managing the SBC's activities by appointing leaders to various committees, boards, and positions.

It was also during this time that another significant entity in the SBC was born; the predecessor to the current Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC). In 1908, messengers created the Standing Committee on Temperance, "whose duty it shall be to promote in every way possible the cause of temperance."[37] A second group was created in 1913 to address "other such wrongs which curse society today"[38] and in 1915, these were merged, eventually being renamed the Social Service Commission. It was not until 1942, however, that this group was directly funded by the SBC, and it took until 1947 for this funding to be regularly allocated from the Cooperative Program.[39]

In 1953, the Social Service Commission became the Christian Life Commission (CLC). In its final report before the name change, the commission recognized that its predecessors had been formed with the goal of developing "within our people an awareness of the ethical content of the gospel and the social responsibilities of the Christian life." The CLC thus committed "to provide the factual sources from which all of us can better understand the issues of our day and the moral responsibilities of the Christian life in terms of our Christian faith and practice."[40] Finally, and largely in recognition of the fact that in 1991, messengers had "further enhanced the Commission's responsibilities in the religious liberty, church-state arena," in 1997, the ERLC was christened and continues to

---

[37] *Annual of the 1908 Southern Baptist Convention* (Hot Springs, AR), 36.

[38] *Annual of the 1913 Southern Baptist Convention* (St. Louis, MO), 75–76.

[39] Alex Ward, "Explainer: A history of the ERLC" (ERLC, 8 May 2020) https://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/explainer-a-history-of-the-erlc/.

[40] *Annual of the 1953 Southern Baptist Convention* (Houston, TX), 427–30.

this day.[41]

While there are isolated instances of these groups proposing resolutions to be adopted by messengers (such as in 1932[42] and 1955[43]), more often it appears from the proceedings that this collection of SBC organizations has provided council, advice, and materials to keep the churches of the SBC informed on various issues and topics. Indeed, this sentiment was expressed by messengers in 1936[44] and 1958.[45] This relationship can be seen in the resolutions, particularly for the CLC: it is mentioned in 49 resolutions, often to consider the ethical implications of a particular topic and report back to the convention,[46] to speak publicly on behalf of the SBC,[47] or to prepare resources to inform SBC churches.[48]

Ultimately, the history of the ERLC demonstrates a long-standing, institutionalized commitment by SBC messengers to engage with the secular world and promote Christian values in American society and law. As will be seen in the next section, the various phases of the ERLC's incarnations generally align with the topics identified in Fig. 2; one can see that as this body changes names and gains more responsibility the number and variation of topics increases accordingly.

While most of the resolutions studied did not appear to explicitly originate with these groups, their existence and messengers' reliance on them represent one more way in which the size and complexity of the SBC lead to an efficient, centralized mechanism to address important ethical concerns of individual churches. Additionally, it is probable that the yearly report and teaching materials produced by these organizations and presented to the convention has served to keep certain social and ethical issues at the forefront of the SBC's consciousness, likely driving the consideration and adoption of resolutions on such topics.

The SBC as a Force of Cultural Influence: 1886–2020

After 1900, messengers increasingly used the resolution as a vehicle to address social and political issues external to the organization. This is evidenced in Fig. 3 as the Society and Culture focus begins to increase linearly between 1885 and 2005. Additionally, in Fig. 2, one can see that the

---

[41] *Annual of the 1997 Southern Baptist Convention* (Dallas, TX), 262.

[42] *Annual of the 1932 Southern Baptist Convention* (St. Petersburg, FL), 97.

[43] *Annual of the 1955 Southern Baptist Convention* (Miami, FL), 61.

[44] *Annual of the 1936 Southern Baptist Convention* (St. Louis, MO), 38.

[45] *Annual of the 1958 Southern Baptist Convention* (Houston, TX), 79.

[46] *Annual of the 1962 Southern Baptist Convention* (San Franscisco, CA), 76.

[47] *Annual of the 1973 Southern Baptist Convention* (Portland, OR), 84.

[48] *Annual of the 1981 Southern Baptist Convention* (Los Angeles, CA), 53.

topics related to missions or internal SBC matters quickly lose promi-
nence to issues such as *Prohibition / Moral Concern*, *Religious Freedom*, or
Church and State. This stands in stark contrast to the SBC of the 1800s
which, despite the horrors of slavery and the gross racial inequities fol-
lowing emancipation, chose to largely remain silent, focusing predomi-
nantly on supporting the proclamation of the gospel.

The first major moral issue that captivated the SBC's attention was
Prohibition, an effort to criminalize "the manufacture and sale of intoxi-
cating liquors" which were "opposed to the best interests of society and
government, and the progress of our holy religion."[49] In 1908, the reso-
lution was used to marshal the SBC's substantial resources for this just
war. Messengers framed the conflict in terms of good and evil, appealed
to the government to act, called upon citizens to vote, vowed to work
with other organizations, and committed that SBC churches would
"preach temperance, practice temperance, pray for temperance, and vote
for temperance." These actions appear to have been buoyed by politicians
receptive to the movement, and broad popular support for the effort.[50]

In addition to alcohol, gambling[51] and lynching[52] received condemna-
tion in multiple resolutions between 1890 and 1940. In opposing such
evils, messengers consistently demonstrated a desire for the government
to legislate and enforce righteous behavior. This largely remains true to-
day, and it is currently the SBC's modus operandi regarding abortion.[53]
Despite often expressing the opinion that the government *ought* to be the
agent enforcing moral order in society, messengers have been significantly
less enthusiastic when they perceived that the same regulatory power
could be used against them.

Around 1940, one can see in Fig. 2 that the *Religious Freedom* and *Church
and State* topics become quite prominent. During this period messengers
began to sound the alarm on government actions they believed threatened
the church-state status quo. For example, when opposing an amendment
to the Social Security Act, the SBC argued

> the tax proposed by Senate Bill No. 3579 would in our sober judg-
> ment be violative of the American principle of the Separation of
> Church and State and would amount to usurpation of the powers
> of the Federal Government with reference to religious bodies of

every faith-Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, and all others.[54]

Taxation was a major concern between 1950 and 1990, captured by
the *Taxation and Legislation* topic in Fig. 2. This also included opposition
to any government funds being used at religious schools[55] and the estab-
lishment of formal diplomatic ties between the US and the Vatican.[56]

In the 1960s (against the backdrop of the civil rights movement, the
sexual revolution, and the Vietnam War), the focus of the resolution
shifted as messengers began to directly address the moral nature of con-
temporary issues. This can be seen in Fig. 2 by the diversification of topics
including *The Family*, *Hunger*, and *Pornography* and was accompanied by an
expansion of the CLC's responsibilities in 1961.[57] This trend has contin-
ued into the present and many such resolutions follow a consistent for-
mat: an issue is recognized, the ideal vision is presented, and an appropri-
ate solution or position statement is adopted.

Within these resolutions one increasingly finds messengers concerned
about the direction of America. In 1986, due to "the suppression of reli-
gious expression and Christian views in the United States," messengers
called for "Southern Baptists to become active participants in the political
life of this country—at the local, state and federal levels—in order to de-
fend and promote the traditional Judeo-Christian values." This action was
"necessary if America is to survive as a nation founded upon those val-
ues."[58] In 2004, messengers adopted a similar statement in response to a
"cultural drift in our nation toward secularism."[59] Both resolutions ulti-
mately identified that America's survival hung in the balance and implied
that society had largely rejected significant portions of the messengers'
culture and values.

Correspondingly, in Fig. 2, one can see an increase in the *Religious Free-
dom* topic after the 1980s due to the adoption of resolutions highlighting
ways in which messengers believed the state, typically at the Federal level,
was impeding the free exercise of religion. Violations of this principle
were broadly identified as challenges to the functioning of the SBC or
other religious groups. This included issues such as non-discrimination

[49] *Annual of the 1886 Southern Baptist Convention* (Montgomery, AL), 38.
[50] *Annual of the 1908 Southern Baptist Convention* (Hot Springs, AR), 36.
[51] *Annual of the 1890 Southern Baptist Convention* (Fort Worth, TX), 40.
[52] *Annual of the 1935 Southern Baptist Convention* (Memphis, TN), 70.
[53] *Annual of the 2021 Southern Baptist Convention* (Nashville, TN), 104–6.

[54] *Annual of the 1940 Southern Baptist Convention* (Baltimore, MD), 127.
[55] *Annual of the 1972 Southern Baptist Convention* (Philadelphia, PA), 75–76.
[56] *Annual of the 1942 Southern Baptist Convention* (San Antonio, TX), 86–87.
[57] *Annual of the 1961 Southern Baptist Convention* (St. Louis, MO), 60–63.
[58] *Annual of the 1986 Southern Baptist Convention* (Atlanta, GA), 75.
[59] *Annual of the 2004 Southern Baptist Convention* (Indianapolis, IN), 83.

employment laws being applied to religious organizations[60] and "businesses with a religious character."[61] Additionally, messengers opposed the use of tax dollars for purposes that "blaspheme God and offend religious citizens"[62] and argued that through taxation they became morally complicit in supporting evils like abortion.[63]

Behind this consistent concern for secular society appears to be a belief that the church ought to terraform the world into the kingdom of God. This was explicitly spelled out in 1908, when messengers tied the social and political impacts of Prohibition to the Great Commission, noting that

> Civic Righteousness and the Kingdom of God are bound up in each other. We are learning anew that Christ's commission to his followers is not primarily to increase the census of heaven, but to make down here a righteous society in which Christ's will shall be done, his kingdom come.[64]

A similar sentiment is also found in the SBC's first statement of faith, the Baptist Faith and Message (1925), which included a provision stating that

> every Christian is under obligation to seek to make the will of Christ regnant in his own life and in human society to oppose in the spirit of Christ every form of greed, selfishness, and vice; to provide for the orphaned, the aged, the helpless, and the sick; to seek to bring industry, government, and society as a whole under the sway of the principles of righteousness, truth and brotherly love.[65]

Given that this phrase is still present in the 2000 version of the Baptist Faith and Message, and looking through the titles of the topics identified in Fig. 2, it appears that since the early 1900s messengers have largely used the resolution to promote political and cultural engagement as a means to bring external institutions into line with the messengers' understanding of Christian principles of righteousness. Indeed, the topics identified in Fig. 2 demonstrate an increasing tendency to use the resolution to engage with issues not directly related to the SBC's missionary purpose. From 1908 through the present, it would appear that messengers acted on a belief

---

[60] *Annual of the 1991 Southern Baptist Convention* (Atlanta, GA), 75.

[61] *Annual of the 2010 Southern Baptist Convention* (Orlando, FL), 111.

[62] *Annual of the 1998 Southern Baptist Convention* (Salt Lake City, UT), 92.

[63] *Annual of the 2013 Southern Baptist Convention* (Houston, TX), 93.

[64] *Annual of the 1908 Southern Baptist Convention* (Hot Springs, AR), 36.

[65] "Comparison Chart" (Southern Baptist Convention, 2021), https://bfm.sbc.net/comparison-chart/.

that it is the duty of the Church to advance the Kingdom of God by promoting a 'Christian' society, as they have increasingly used the resolution to promote their vision for America's social, cultural, and political institutions against an increasing spiritual and ideological threat.

The Rise of Biblical Supremacy: 1990–2020

The final cluster seen in Fig. 2 is distinguished primarily by the Biblical Exposition topic. This language begins to gain prominence in the late 1990s, and in the following decades commands well over 30 percent of all resolutions per year. Furthermore, it is largely responsible for the fact that *Biblical Language* becomes the predominant focus of the SBC's resolutions after 2005. What is particularly interesting about this topic is that, rather than capturing the SBC's response to a particular issue, it identifies a recent, novel tendency to explicitly reference the Bible in resolutions as a means of justifying particular moral positions and recommendations.

When viewed from a numerical perspective, this shift is rather stark; in the resolutions, there are few explicit references to the biblical text until about 1985. After this, the number of references per resolution increases incredibly rapidly. This is displayed in Fig. 4, which counts the average number of references to the Bible per resolution, breaking it up by references to Old Testament passages, New Testament passages, and the Bible generally.
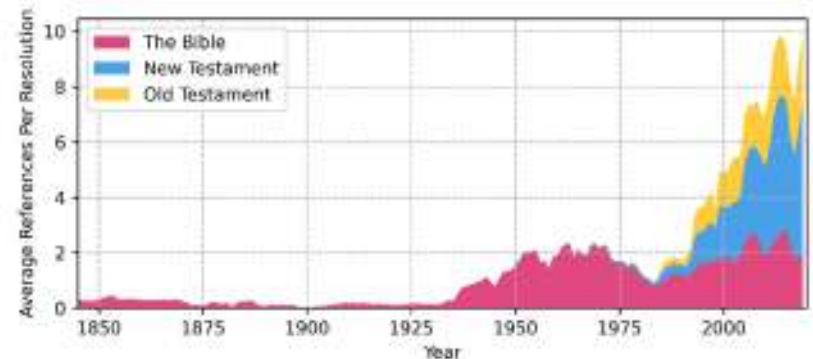

Figure 4: The average number of references per resolution to the Bible, a specific New Testament passage, or a specific Old Testament passage. The Bible includes phrases such as Bible, Scripture, word of God, and God's word. Old and New Testament references are defined by the name (or abbreviation) of one of the books in the Bible immediately followed by a digit (i.e., Matthew 3 or Matt 3). Values have been smoothed using a ten-year rolling mean and have been stacked on top of each other to display the total of all observed mentions of Scripture.

From Fig. 4, one can see that for most of the SBC's history messengers rarely mentioned the Bible in their resolutions. This is itself somewhat surprising, as the organization has always officially held a high view of

Scripture. All SBC statements of faith (including the New Hampshire Confession of Faith,[66] on which the SBC's own statement is modeled) begin with the belief that the Bible "is, and will remain to the end of the world, the true center of Christian union, and the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds and religious opinions should be tried."[67] Given this language, and the broad range of topics covered over the course of the SBC's existence, one would expect to see the Bible mentioned many times.

It isn't until the 1940s, however, that references to Scripture were regularly included in resolutions. This increase was primarily due to the SBC's support of the American Bible Society, which appears in Fig. 2 under the Distribution of Scripture topic. Starting in 1949, the SBC began to adopt a near-yearly resolution calling on "all our churches and our people to make worthy contributions to the work of the American Bible Society,"[68] an organization committed to translating, publishing, and distributing scriptures. Based on reports in the proceedings, the seeds of this fiscal partnership begin somewhere around 1935.[69] With supply chain disruptions caused by World War II limiting the ability of other nation's Bible societies to function,[70] the SBC adopted a resolution encouraging the body to support this society every year between 1949 and 1982.

It is likely that the SBC was uncharacteristically consistent in supporting the American Bible Society because the text of Scripture had become intimately connected with the SBC's understanding of its missionary purpose. In 1956, one of the resolutions adopted recognized that "widespread distribution of the printed word of God is a basic need in mission work around the world" and that "missionary advance calls for even greater distribution of Bibles, New Testaments, gospels, and other individual books of the Bible."[71]

In one sense, this support was pragmatic, as the SBC's missionaries directly benefited from having easy access to the Bible in various translations.[72] It was also in line with the SBC's focus after 1900 of molding America into the likeness of the kingdom of God, a desire explicit in the following excerpt from a 1945 report by the SBC's executive committee.

> … thoughtful reading of the Word of God will not only bring faith, hope and courage to millions of people now tortured by

---

[66] Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), 742.
[67] "Comparison Chart."
[68] *Annual of the 1949 Southern Baptist Convention* (Oklahoma City, OK), 53.
[69] *Annual of the 1935 Southern Baptist Convention* (Memphis, TN), 86.
[70] *Annual of the 1942 Southern Baptist Convention* (San Antonio, TX), 47.
[71] *Annual of the 1956 Southern Baptist Convention* (Kansas City, MO), 55.
[72] *Annual of the 1942 Southern Baptist Convention* (San Antonio, TX), 47.

doubt, uncertainty and fear, but such reading will also effectively serve to repair the moral character and spiritual ideals which form the necessary foundation for enduring democracy... the time is ripe to magnify the place of the Bible in American life.[73]

While this study cannot assess whether the SBC was successful in promoting the Bible in American society, it is certainly true that the Bible became the focal point during one of the most significant events in the SBC's history: the Conservative Resurgence. This was a popular, political movement which, according to one of its architects, Paige Patterson, sought to keep "the denomination close to a reliable Bible for the sake of evangelistic and missionary outreach."[74] Ultimately its proponents gained control over the SBC's leadership by electing a conservative president who then appointed "conservatives, who in turn appointed other conservatives, who nominated the trustees, who elected the agency heads and institutional presidents."[75] This process began with the election of Adrian Rogers as president in 1979, and within about a decade, conservatives had been successfully appointed as leaders in most levels of the organization.

This campaign was naturally met with resistance, and, in response to the ensuing conflict, a Peace Committee was commissioned by the SBC in 1985 to identify the root issue and provide recommendations.[76] Its report, published in 1987, identified the primary cause of disunity as related to "the phrase in Article I of the Baptist Faith and Message Statement of 1963, that the Bible 'has truth without any mixture of error for its matter.'"[77] In the words of the committee,

> … there are at least two separate and distinct interpretations of Article I of the Baptist Faith and Message Statement of 1963, reflective of the diversity present in the Convention. One view holds that when the article says the Bible has "truth without any mixture of error for its matter," it means all areas-historical, scientific, theological and philosophical. The other holds the "truth" relates only to matters of faith and practice.

In the face of these ideological divisions the recommendation of the committee was to emphasize historical unity for the cause of missions.[78] In the same year, however, President Adrian Rogers took the position of

---

[73] *Annual of the 1945 Southern Baptist Convention* (Nashville, TN), 32.
[74] Paige Patterson, *Anatomy of a Reformation* (Fort Worth, TX: Seminary Hill Press, 2004).
[75] Mohler, "The Southern Baptist Reformation—a First-Hand Account."
[76] *Annual of the 1985 Southern Baptist Convention* (Dallas, TX), 64.
[77] *Annual of the 1987 Southern Baptist Convention* (St. Louis, MO), 233.
[78] *Annual of the 1987 Southern Baptist Convention* (St. Louis, MO), 239–40.

the Resurgence, identifying the basis of the convention's unity as "spiritual and doctrinal," placing consistent belief above functional cooperation in missions.[79]

In the following decades, it appears that the majority of the SBC embraced Adrian Rogers's basis for unity. Writing in 2004, messengers to the SBC adopted a triumphant resolution commemorating the "twenty-fifth anniversary of the conservative resurgence within the Southern Baptist Convention," to which they attributed a renewed commitment to the SBC's "original foundations, rooted in and committed to Jesus Christ and to the Scriptures as the inspired and inerrant Word of God." In the messengers' estimation, the adoption of the Conservative Resurgence's interpretation of Article I was what "reenergized the mission of the Southern Baptist Convention to take the gospel to the uttermost parts of the earth."[80]

More recently the need for doctrinal unity was codified in the SBC's constitution. In 2015, the SBC added a requirement that messengers to the convention, who are able to vote on leadership, be members of a church that holds "a faith and practice which closely identifies with the Convention's adopted statement of faith. (By way of example, churches which act to affirm, approve, or endorse homosexual behavior would be deemed not to be in cooperation with the Convention.)"[81] The explicit inclusion of doctrinal requirements in the SBC's constitution represents a significant shift from the 1845 document. Initially the only requirement to be a delegate at the convention was that one be appointed from a body which contributed funds to the SBC. The constitution explicitly included a clause stating that the SBC was committed to respecting "the independence and equal rights of the Churches,"[82] a phrase noticeably absent in the current version.

Consequently, it would appear that the relatively sudden appearance in resolutions of explicit biblical references and the messengers' frequent appeals to the divine authority of Scripture for moral support may be best understood as a part of a more general shift in the definition of unity within the SBC from functional cooperation in missions to shared belief. This was to a large extent the purpose of the Conservative Resurgence, which explicitly sought to install leaders adhering to specific beliefs in order to steer the SBC towards particular doctrines. The implications of this are still being played out today. In 2023, the SBC Executive Committee

---

[79] Roy Jennings, "SBC Messengers Elect Rogers, Ok Peace Report," *Baptist Press* (1987): 3, http://media.sbhla.org.s3.amazonaws.com/6401,22-Jun-1987.

[80] *Annual of the 2004 Southern Baptist Convention* (Indianapolis, IN), 85–86.

[81] *Annual of the 2015 Southern Baptist Convention* (Columbus, OH), 6–7.

[82] *Annual of the 1845 Southern Baptist Convention* (Augusta, GA), 3.

approved a recommendation, initiated by messengers at the 2021 Convention,[83] to break fellowship with Saddleback Church because its appointment of women pastors contradicts Article VI of the Baptist Faith and Message.[84]

Summary and Conclusions

In 175 years, the Southern Baptist Convention has changed considerably. Beginning as a missions organization, it has since grown into what is effectively the second largest Christian denomination in the United States. The yearly resolutions adopted by the SBC provide a means of understanding how the group's focus and priorities have shifted, as they require a majority to be adopted and are written with the intent of public dissemination. In this analysis, all resolutions adopted by the SBC between 1845 and 2020 were collected, cleaned, and processed using data science techniques. Non-negative Matrix Factorization was then applied to identify topics in the documents, revealing several significant changes in how the language of the resolution has changed through the decades. Combined with select statements from the yearly proceedings, context for the shifts observed has been provided.

The resulting narrative is a compelling one: the SBC was originally founded as a missionary organization in order to make space for slaveholders to represent the Church abroad. In keeping with its missional goals, between 1845 and 1900 the SBC largely used the resolution to direct and support its missionary activities alongside managing administrative tasks. During this early period messengers mostly remained silent on other issues.

As the organization grew and expanded three significant shifts occurred. First, between 1890 and 1940, there was a push to mechanize the SBC. This ultimately resulted in a functional move to a more representative form of governance and, through the creation of the ERLC, an institutional commitment to engage with broader moral and ethical issues. Second, around 1900, the SBC began to increasingly use its public platform to directly address social, cultural, and political issues, starting with a complete and total support for the prohibition of alcohol. Finally, following the Conservative Resurgence's success in 1990, the SBC appears to have largely embraced unity in doctrine, grounding almost every moral

---

[83] *Annual of the 2022 Southern Baptist Convention* (Anaheim, CA), 60.

[84] Jonathan Howe and Brandon Porter, "Saddleback Church deemed 'not in friendly cooperation' with SBC" (Baptist Press, 21 February 2023), https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/saddleback-church-deemed-not-in-friendly-cooperation-with-sbc/.

position and statement present in the resolutions under the supreme authority of Scripture.