

A Resolution Against White Supremacy Causes Chaos at the Southern Baptist Convention - The Atlantic

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The Southern Baptist Convention's annual meeting turned chaotic in Phoenix this week over a resolution that condemned white supremacy and the alt-right. On Tuesday, leaders initially declined to consider the proposal submitted by a prominent black pastor in Texas, Dwight McKissic, and only changed course after a significant backlash. On Wednesday afternoon, the body passed a revised statement against the alt-right. But the drama over the resolution revealed deep tension lines within a denomination that was explicitly founded to support slavery.

A few weeks before the meeting was slated to start, McKissic published his draft resolution on a popular Southern Baptist blog called SBC Voices. The language was strong and pointed.

It affirmed that "there has arisen in the United States a growing menace to political order and justice that seeks to reignite social animosities, reverse improvements in race relations, divide our people, and foment hatred, classism, and ethnic cleansing." It identified this "toxic menace" as white nationalism and the alt-right, and urged the denomination to oppose its "totalitarian impulses, xenophobic biases, and bigoted ideologies that infect the minds and actions of its violent disciples." It claimed that the origin of white supremacy in Christian communities is a once-popular theory known as the "curse of Ham," which taught that "God through Noah ordained descendants of Africa to be subservient to Anglos" and was used as justification for slavery and segregation. The resolution called on the denomination to denounce nationalism and "reject the retrograde ideologies, xenophobic biases, and

racial bigotries of the so-called 'alt-right' that seek to subvert our government, destabilize society, and infect our political system.”

Submitting the proposal was just the first step, though. Every resolution up for consideration has to pass through a committee, which chooses whether or not proposals will be heard by the full meeting body. And the resolutions committee decided not to move McKissic's proposal forward.

“We were very aware that on this issue, feelings rightly run high regarding alt-right ideology,” said Barrett Duke, the head of the resolutions committee, in an interview on Wednesday morning. “We share those feelings ... We just weren't certain we could craft a resolution that would enable us to measure our strong convictions with the grace of love, which we're also commended by Jesus to incorporate.” The resolutions committee did not reach out to McKissic ahead of the meeting to work on a revised version of the resolution, Duke said.

Southern Baptist leaders sat through a long series of meetings on Tuesday afternoon. They affirmed a number of standard proposals about their beliefs and practices, and even approved a resolution calling for moral character in public officials—a nearly exact replica of a resolution passed during the Clinton years at the height of the Monica Lewinsky scandal. The not-so-veiled jab at President Trump went through quietly, despite conflicts in the denomination over the election. The peace was short-lived, though: Chaos soon broke out over McKissic's resolution.

If the resolutions committee decides not to hear a proposal, delegates can introduce a motion for reconsideration from the floor. Late on Tuesday afternoon, McKissic went to the mic and

moved for additional time to be allotted for the resolution to be heard. Standing among a chatting body of tired pastors, many of whom were already checked out for the day and didn't realize what was happening, his motion failed—once again, the resolution would not be heard.

All hell broke loose. “The amount of work left to do in ‘evangelical’ (who knows that means any more?) church is staggering,” tweeted Thabiti Anyabwile, a black Southern Baptist pastor who was not at the meeting. “Here’s the largest failing publicly.” He went on:

We must be clear: We live in a time when equivocating on these matters furthers the sin of racism even to violence and death. ...

Any “church” that cannot denounce white supremacy without hesitancy and equivocation is a dead, Jesus denying assembly. No 2 ways about it. ...

I’m done. With this Twitter spiel. With “evangelicalism.” With all the racist and indifferent nonsense that passes as “Christian.”

Jackie Hill Perry, a black artist and teacher who has frequently spoken at Southern Baptist events, tweeted that “the decision made at #SBC17 to not denounce white supremacy is hurtful.” Trillia Newbell, a black staffer at the denomination’s Ethics and Religious Commission in Washington, replied, “I’m seriously in tears. What’s going on?!”

“I certainly understand that hurt and anger, because to most people, this would be a no-brainer,” said McKissic in an interview on Wednesday. “Several of the resolutions they

endorsed yesterday were just carte blanche things Southern Baptists believe. And so, it becomes a mystery how you can so easily affirm standard beliefs about other things, but we get to white supremacy ... and all of a sudden, we've got a problem here."

Meanwhile, alt-right figure Richard Spencer tweeted his support.

So apparently the Southern Baptists Convention *didn't* denounce the Alt-Right after all. Interesting development!
<https://t.co/07RUvoUOTc>

— Richard Spencer (@RichardBSpencer) June 14, 2017

According to several attendees, once people realized what had happened, a number of leaders started lobbying to get the motion reconsidered.

"A group of us gathered around McKissic, and resolved that we were going to see what we could do with this," said Dave Gass, the white pastor of Grace Family Fellowship in Pleasant Hill, Missouri. As they worked behind the scenes, the Convention's top leaders were apparently also in crisis mode trying to fix the situation. The committee's problem with the resolution was apparently "a few key phrases that left a few things unclear," Gass said. "It wasn't that they didn't like the resolution. It's that they didn't like the wording of the resolution."

Even if the committee's decision was based on rhetorical nitpicks, it looked like the denomination had refused to condemn the alt-right. After a few frantic hours, around 9 p.m., the body reconvened. Pastors tweeted in all-caps trying to get people back into the convention hall, and Steve Gaines, the

newly reelected president of the Southern Baptist Convention, begged people not to leave.

“The committee on resolutions is prepared to report out a resolution on the anti-gospel, alt-right, white-supremacy movement,” explained Barry McCarty, the Convention’s parliamentarian. But not quite yet—because of Robert’s Rules of Order, he said, they had to wait until Wednesday afternoon to vote.

“We’re pretty frustrated,” said Gass. “It was incredibly anticlimactic to those pacing at the back of the room waiting for this to get done.”

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Delay notwithstanding, the leaders’ sense of urgency was obvious. Gaines urged the body to let the world know that “we decry, we come against every kind of racism that there is.” He encouraged people to grant the new procedural request, allowing the committee to present the resolution again on Wednesday. Ballots went up all over the room—Gass said it looked like there wasn’t a single “no” vote. “The affirmative has it,” Gaines said, “praise the living God.”

Over the last several years, the Southern Baptist Convention has made “racial reconciliation” one of its priorities, building on work begun in 1995 when it first apologized for its role in sustaining and promoting slavery. In 2015, the denomination passed a resolution supporting racial reconciliation, and in 2016, it called on Christians to stop displaying the Confederate battle flag.

But to many in the denomination, any progress was significantly undermined by the 2016 election. With 81 percent of white evangelicals supporting Trump, African Americans in particular felt like they had been betrayed. As Anyabwile said of his fellow Christians in an interview with me shortly after Trump was elected, “I feel like they haven’t understood any of my concerns as a racial minority and an African American.”

This isn’t just about black congregations, though. At Gass’s predominantly white church in Missouri, “we’re right on the border between Kansas and Missouri, so the blood feud goes all the way back to the Civil War,” he said. “For pastors like me in a normal-sized Baptist church, these issues really matter. For me to be able to take it back to my congregation and say ‘Hey, what I’ve been preaching on every week in Ephesians, about how the gospel changes our view toward other people—our whole denomination is acknowledging this.’ We need to be on board with this.”

Tuesday night came close to being another defining, polarizing moment in a denomination that’s already facing significant divisions. By the time the night had ended, it seemed all but assured that the resolution, now with revised language, would pass. The resolutions committee consulted with Russell Moore, the head of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, to draft new language, Duke told me, but they did not consult with McKissic, the original author. “This is the committee’s resolution,” he said. “This is not Brother McKissic’s resolution.”

On Wednesday, McKissic said he is okay not having been consulted “because I don’t think it’s customary. ... Once that person has submitted, I don’t think you’re normally involved.” There is one African American member on the 10-person resolutions committee, Roland Slade.

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On Wednesday afternoon, the body finally considered a new version of the resolution. It includes some significant changes, like the removal of the reference to the “curse of Ham” justification for slavery. “The resolution states clearly our opposition to racism,” Duke said. “To us, that is a repudiation of the teaching of the Ham doctrine ... It was redundant.” McKissic said he thinks “it’s a fine document” and he “support[s] it 100 percent.” If he “were to add one thing,” he said, “I wish it had specified the ‘curse of Ham’ ... that the Southern Baptist Convention for a long time in her history taught and endorsed.” But the omission wouldn’t stop him from voting for the resolution, he said. “I can live with that.”

As the body prepared for its final vote, several pastors made emotional pleas for their support. “This resolution has a number on it. It’s resolution number 10,” said Moore. “The white supremacy it opposes also has a number on it. It’s ‘666.’” Charles Hedman, a pastoral assistant at Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., warned of the consequences of not passing the resolution. “Twitter was full of the alt-right calling Southern Baptists heroes after we failed to denounce the alt-right,” he said. “I’ve spoken to pastors in this conference who say that if we do not act ... they will have to pull out of this convention.”

The resolution was approved, nearly unanimously. In a follow-up interview after the final vote, Moore said the back-and-forth over the resolution “demonstrates the ways that there can be blindspots of not seeing what it is that some are facing.” Because of its history, the Southern Baptist Convention has “a

special responsibility to deeply consider issues of racial injustice,” he added. “We have a long way to go, but I was happy with the result.”

In the end, the denomination even earned bored disapproval from Spencer—he tweeted about the “cucked SBC” when he saw it was likely to condemn the alt-right. But as McKissic told me, the incident “showed a fault line. It showed that maybe, just maybe, you aren’t where you’re supposed to be on this.” It may have been a procedural snafu, as some attendees would have it, but it revealed deep fracture lines—ones that won’t be erased with any resolution.