

FIRST PERSON: Learning from the law of unintended consequences

By Jennifer Rash

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Watching and covering aspects of the Southern Baptist Convention Annual Meeting the past few years reminds me of the law of unintended consequences.

Supposedly penned in 1936 by American sociologist Robert K. Merton, the phrase is clear in what it describes, and most of us have experienced it at some point in our lives.

As far as the SBC meetings go, I think back to 2019 when messengers approved the creation of an official Credentials Committee and wonder how the conversations around SBC life would be different today without its creation.

It was the Credentials Committee, sharing from the convention platform in a vulnerable moment in 2022, that led to Virginia pastor Mike Law taking on the challenge of helping the group define “pastor.”

You can read in this edition of The Baptist Paper or online and in coverage from last year’s SBC Annual Meeting about Law and his proposed amendment to the SBC constitution.

Decisions from years past

But going back decades prior, could it have been the trendy movement among church staff to upgrade ministers’ titles to include a version of the word “pastor” in them that got us to this latest moment?

Until that trend, a person with the title “pastor” was clearly

the official top seat on the church staff and the main shepherd over the congregation.

When Law's motion was presented for its first vote of the messengers last year, the presiding chair could have requested a ballot vote rather than going with the raised ballot method.

Would the results have been different in 2023 if messengers had been able to vote by secret ballot rather than raising their hands high in the air for all around to see? Maybe but maybe not.

Revising official documents, systems

More important, however, is the concern that a large convention hall of messengers can make a major change so quickly without time to read and understand the nuances of the words and phrases within a motion that is presented.

When this happened with the addition to the Baptist Faith & Message proposed by Alabama pastor Jared Cornutt last year, it caught most people by surprise.

And, as you might expect, a safeguard is now being put in place for changes to the BF&M.

It took years, but a similar upgrade finally happened regarding the system for each year's messenger body as they consider resolutions.

Messengers to the 2024 meeting were able to review the resolution wording in advance of the meeting rather than being handed a stack of resolutions a few hours before the vote would take place.

The system is still far from perfect, but it's a good first step. Another solid step would be to find a way to keep business items focused on the specific work of the convention.

Sometimes an individual will use the business structure of the

annual meeting to present motions, resolutions or rhetoric on personal agenda items.

Assessing the costs

While the right to focus on whatever we choose in our ministry journey is a treasured part of local church autonomy, it hurts my heart to watch brothers and sisters in Christ turn on each other over differences of opinions.

If we become immune to hurtful and potentially manipulative barbs from those in our faith family, then how much easier is it for us to either start participating and carrying it with us to other places or lose our sensitivities and compassion for others overall?

Choosing absolute dedication and a whatever-it-takes determination to win at the expense of personal relationships brings its own set of unintended consequences.