

# IN THE MARGINS: Fun with Baptists – making sausage

*By Tony Martin*

*Editor*

You'll find elsewhere in *The Record* all sorts of news items about the Southern Baptist Convention which met in Indianapolis June 11–12 (and that time span doesn't include all the other meetings piggybacking on the event.) There was plenty going on for the most ardent Baptist. If you love meetings, you could have your quota filled.

There's a famous statement that was allegedly spoken by Otto Von Bismark: "Laws are like sausages. It's better not to see them being made."

This is usually attributed to Bismarck, but the Iron Chancellor was not associated with that quip until the 1930's. The Daily Cleveland Herald, March 29, 1869, quoted lawyer-poet John Godfrey Saxe that "Laws, like sausages, cease to inspire respect in proportion as we know how they are made," and this may be the true origin of the saying.

I can assure you that's not the case at the Southern Baptist Convention. Motions are made and voted on, resolutions have their time in the limelight and are dealt with, entity heads are given opportunity to share what they're up to (and often must deal with pointed questions) – and all this sausage is ground in the wide-open.

Just about 50 shy of 11,000 messengers took over the Indiana Convention Center. It's like a big family reunion. And when you have a family reunion that big, you can just bet there'll be stories to tell after the fact.

Let me, then, in very un-journalistic fashion, give my

personal impressions. If I'm accused of being tongue-in-cheek, fine. Some folks take themselves way too seriously, and I've spent a few days with them. I'm having to go through detox.

- Indianapolis is a great convention city. Everything is nice and compact and it's easy walking distance to whatever you need to do. Like eat. Lots of eating takes place during the Convention, and "where'd you eat?" is a common question.
- The convention center, hotels, shops, and restaurants are connected by what are called Skywalks. You can get from place to place without your feet ever touching the ground. I felt like a hamster in one of those Habitrail tubes.
- Dress code? Feel free to wear whatever you wish to the convention. From cargo shorts to suits, I saw it all. Not many neckties, though.
- The convention is a parliamentarian's dream. Al Gage was the chief parliamentarian, with a backup team of three assistants. That crew earned their keep. So much of this was really esoteric – motions, and amendments, and point of orders, all stacking up on each other. There were lots of moving parts, and Mr. Gage did a commendable job. Rules are rules, and I think we kept them. Even those in the footnotes of Robert's Rules of Order. \*
- The phrase "I call for the question" is pure gold and was typically met with applause.
- Speaking of applause – Don Currence was the Registration Secretary, and also is mayor of Ozark, Missouri. He is Administrative Pastor at First Baptist Church there, a role he's served in for 30 years. If there was anyone at the convention who rose to cult status, this is the guy. He was responsible for making sure votes and ballots were handled decently and in order. He has a dry wit, and at the end of the first evening's business – and it had been a long day – he was met with chants of "Let's

go, Don!” for the last vote of the day.

- In that same vein, outgoing president Bart Barber did a fine job of wrangling a sometimes-unruly group. “Unruly” may not be the proper term for our convention goers – maybe “spirited” is a better description. Bro. Bart is also quick witted, and just the right quip at the right time tended to lessen tension. He had a poignant moment after he had to recuse himself from acting as chair because of a motion that involved him – he simply said, “I’ve done the best I knew how to do.” We’ve all been there, haven’t we?
- Most everyone played nicely together, and disagreed agreeably. There was one moment where I felt like things got personal, but that moment was fleeting.
- Some people love to be outraged.
- I’ve been reading reports of the Convention in the secular press. By and large, they are clueless as to how we conduct business. They love to latch onto anything that would breed controversy. They came up empty-handed on some issues. Too bad for them, right?
- I saw plenty of kids, from preschool to teenagers, crashed on benches around the convention center. They were just demonstrating what a lot of adults probably wanted to do. If the Convention came more than once a year, it would probably ruin your health.
- Don’t quote me on this, but I’ve heard that the Southern Baptist Convention meeting is one of the largest, if not the largest, deliberative bodies in the country. That means that anyone who is a messenger can have a shot at a microphone. It’d be judgmental for me to say something like “some folks just like to hear themselves talk,” because I don’t know their stories or what moved them to speak their peace. Still. There were times when a little self-editing would have been appropriate.
- Motions, motions, and more motions. In all my years of Convention going, I don’t remember there ever being so many. Again, the parliamentarians were essential to keep

things from descending into chaos. I lost count of how many there were, and I'd have to do a deep dive to determine what many of them were even about.

- I did have a favorite motion, brought by a David Miller: "To request the Executive Committee to publish the names of messengers on both sides of their name tags." That's not a bad idea.
- Another favorite moment was when a messenger at the mic asked Adam Groza, president of Gateway Seminary, "what kind of hair spray do you use?" Dr. Groza does have an admirable head full of hair. I tend to notice things like that.
- More catch phrases: "Task force" and "Blue ribbon committee."
- The word of the Convention might have been "transparency." This is good. I may be naïve but, when well-informed and not caught off guard, messengers tend to do the right thing.
- As always, the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission and the North American Mission Boards were hot topics and the subject of several motions. You can count on them being embroiled in some controversy.
- Last subjective observation: Southern Baptists can grind mighty good sausage and do it in a way that the world can see.

Folks asked me, "was it a good convention?" It was. God is in control.

*\* Fun trivia: U.S. Army officer Henry M. Roberts' interest in parliamentary procedure began in 1863 when he was chosen to preside over a church meeting and, although he accepted the task, he felt that he did not have the necessary knowledge of proper procedure. The first edition was published in 1876. His grandson, Henry M. Robert III, Trustee for the Robert's Rules Association, has been instrumental in developing later editions. I'll bet the whole family is Baptist.*