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**Baptist Tradition and Pulpit  
Committees: The Pastor Selection  
Process – a Case Study**

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We, as Southern Baptists, have long held the tradition that the choosing of a pastor by a local church is one which each church determines to do in the manner in which it decides. There is no question that the pastoral selection process in a Southern Baptist Church is one of the most responsible challenges which a church undertakes, and in particular the members of the committee designated with the charge to bring a recommendation to the church on the selection of a pastor.

However, before one enters into a selection process there has to come a time when the church has a pulpit that comes vacant. Vacancies in pulpit in Southern Baptists Churches are usually created in one of several manners. One manner is that a pastor serving the church suddenly passes away and as a result of his death a replacement is sought. A second occurs when the pastor feels a call from God to serve in another church or another service in the Southern Baptist work or retires. Both of the above are not as traumatic as the third method. The first method comes about in a serious and sad state of affairs upon the loss of a dearly beloved pastor, but the congregation as a whole remain united by his passing. The second, although traumatic, is equally one where the people are united and recognize that their pastor has accepted a call elsewhere or retired.

The third which is the one which our case study considers is when the pulpit becomes vacant because of people/pastor problems. That is, that either the pastor is forced to resign by a vote of the congregation or the pastor feels impelled to resign and seek a place elsewhere because of problems and pressures within the local church.

Our case study deals with the church in which I am a member; First Baptist Church of Cocoa, Florida, and it deals with the loss of a pastor as a result of a resignation which was prompted by problems from within the church. It is my view that the loss of a pastor in this manner is even much more of a grief situation than the loss of a pastor through death. The reason being is that not only is the grief cycle a part of what has occurred, but there are tensions and difficulties between members of the congregation. Thus, in any pastoral selection process where this condition exists, in addition to the grief cycle there is the anguish and confusion and even anger over the way that the pulpit became vacant.

Our case study deals with the situation such as this which occurred in 1978 at First Baptist Church of Cocoa, Florida. One must understand that this is a traditional, middle-of-the-road, typical Southern Baptist Church in a downtown area and community. Its role is not as strong as it may have been in the community ten years preceding this vacancy. The history of the church is that it was constituted in 1910 in the community.

The problems that arose between various families in the church seem to have been from roots and causes which are to this day foggy and unclear to many members of the congregation. The various statements made are not precise enough to define with any certainty.

The departure of the former pastor came by his submitting his letter of resignation at the conclusion of a Sunday Service on July 30, 1978. He read his letter of resignation which included the fact that he had been called to serve in a church in another area and would be leaving immediately. He requested in his letter that he be compensated for his unpaid vacation time and other leave time.

On August 2, 1978 at a special called business meeting the Deacons' Minister Relations Committee was given the responsibility of filling the pulpit until an interim pastor could be selected by the church. At the same meeting the determination of service on the Pastor Selection Committee was to be members of the church who are nominated by the church moderator, chairman of the nominating committee and chairman of the Deacons. At the business meeting of August 23, 1978, the report of the Special Pulpit Nomination Committee was submitted which named nine persons to serve on the Pastor Selection Committee. The

makeup of the Pastor Selection Committee was an excellent cross section of the church, including some members who were strong supporters of the former pastor and perhaps as many as three who were considered opponents of the former pastor and others who appeared to be somewhat neutral on the issues. It included six males and three females. The ages were 27 to over 66.

The Special Pulpit Nominating Committee made recommendations for guidelines to be established for this selection. The guidelines included that the Pastor Selection Committee elect a chairman, vice chairman and secretary, and that the committee report its activities at least once every three months at a regular or special business meeting. Further, they required that the Pastor Selection Committee submit a unanimous vote of a proposed pastor to the church and that only one proposed pastor be given to the church at any given time. Also included was the recommendation that at least the majority of the members of the Pastor Selection Committee personally hear the recommended pastor preach at his home church and that the committee members either interview or personally confer with each proposed pastor before any recommendation is presented to the church. Adequate funds were proposed for the committee to meet its needs.

The recommendation also included qualifications of the proposed pastor. It included, qualification of age 28 to 50 years, have an education of at least a Bachelor of Divinity Degree or its equivalent. Further, that the candidate be a pastor or assistant pastor who had at least four years' experience after completing his education. The recommendation also was that the committee investigate the pastor's spiritual, moral congregational, administrative and credit backgrounds and characteristics.

The church at a business meeting amended the recommendation to require that the candidate's degree come from an educational institution having a Southern Baptist background and that the education be at least a bachelor of Divinity Degree and/or a Master of Divinity Degree and that the age requirement be changed to merely read at least 28 years of age.

Shortly after the business meeting the Pastor Selection Committee met. Two of the members, including the author of this paper, were practicing attorneys in the City of Cocoa, one was an insurance broker, all three of the ladies were business or professional women. One of the members was a retired postal supervisor, the youngest member of the committee was an air conditioning specialist with the school system and another member was a long-time business man in the downtown area of the community. The committee elected as chairman one of the two lawyers. Your author was elected as the secretary. The chairman undertook to begin organizing our task.

The vice chairman, your author, had, in anticipation of his service, prepared a paper which he entitled "Selection of a Church Pastor."<sup>1</sup> In it, my attempt was to put my thoughts in order and distribute those thoughts to my fellow committee members. The four-page report included the biblical references which are found in First Timothy and Titus dealing with the qualifications of a pastor. It also included my views as to the role of the pastor as an administer, in addition to his role as a preacher and as one who over-saw the special ministerial needs and care of the congregation. I believed that our new pastor needed to have skills in planning, supervising and evaluating the efforts of the church as an administrator equally as to the other two responsibilities that he would have. It was my intention that we seek constant prayer and guidance of the Holy Spirit in finding God's man for our church and the committee as a whole took that position from the very beginning. The chairman of the committee was a man who was well known for his organizational abilities and planning and methodical approach to his work. He set out to have the committee undertake its task in that manner.

The committee as a whole felt that the publication of the Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention on the pastor selection was an excellent guide to the work of the committee.<sup>2</sup> As a result of

our experience, I found this booklet to be the most helpful and commendable publication available for any church that undertakes a pastor selection.

One of the first things that we determined to do was to find out what the church as a whole felt that a pastor should be and do. The committee set out for more specific directions from the church by preparing a survey utilizing the questionnaire that was published in the Pastor Selection Guideline in the Sunday School Board booklet, previously described. The committee added to the suggestions additional subject matters for the questionnaire, included the issue about the age and what were the three most important tasks from a series of tasks that the new pastor should spend his time. It also asked questions of: (1) Whether or not the pastor should be civic minded and involved in community affairs? (2) Whether it was important to be well-read and up-to-date on current events? (3) Should he be supportive of Cooperative Program and other Southern Baptist work? (4) Should he emphasize evangelistic type sermons or should he vary the sermons as to the type and method according to what he felt were our needs? (5) Did the church feel he should be a competent family counselor? (6) How much experience should he have? (7) Should he encourage and support all our church activities? (8) Did the church feel it was important to have a married pastor with children? There was also a question dealing with the compensation plan. The church was asked what it felt the range of compensation should be. Then there was a provision to recommend any names of prospective candidates that any church member had. Another question dealt with what the member thought was the predominant needs within the church and it had listed eight items plus additional ones. Some questions dealt with what should the relationship between the Deacons and the new pastor be.

The questionnaires were distributed and made available to the church membership and we received a return of forty-two (42) of the questionnaires which was a fairly good sample from an active membership of about seven hundred (700) people. The sample indicated that those responding were overwhelmingly of the opinion that the prospect's age should not be a significant factor. The survey revealed that the order for the most important tasks for the pastor in spending his time was: (1) sermon preparation, Bible reading/prayer, (2) counseling and personal soul winning, (3) visitation of church members, (4) visitation of prospective church members, (5) administration and (6) denominational activities. The church overwhelmingly thought that the pastor should be involved in community affairs, well-read and up-to-date, support the Cooperative Program and Southern Baptist programs, vary his sermons so as not be majoring on evangelistic type, be a competent personal and family counselor and have on the average of at least five years pastoral experience. The issue concerning the pastor being married and having children, the majority listed as not important. The salary range was proposed between \$19,500 and \$24,000 per year for all the benefits, including, allowing it to be broken down into housing allowances, salary, car expenses and convention expenses.

The predominant need of the church was listed as (1) building a strong pulpit ministry, (2) reaching the lost in the community, (3) cooperation amongst the membership, (4) outreach programs for prospective and inactive members. The role of the Deacons to the pastor and the church was that which most churches are now practicing quite well and that is the Deacons would be assisting the pastor in the spiritual needs of the church. A Deacon Family Ministry type of approach was suggested with Deacons not being involved in the business affairs.

After the study, your author, as vice chairman, submitted a suggestion that we come up with an evaluation form of those persons that we are considering in the selection process. This would help us to be as objective as possible and be able to articulate our views on whether or not the candidate that we were examining met the qualifications established in scriptures, by the church and in our own personal evaluation. I prepared an evaluation form checklist which included characteristics of personal qualities, biblical qualities, leadership qualities, pastoral qualities, preaching qualities and financial and other qualities. It was rated on one (1) to four (4) and there were approximately forty (40) different items.

We then began seeking sources of possible candidates. These came from various sources. We contacted our Associational Director of Missions who was of help here. We contacted the Florida Baptist Convention which was of some help. We had members of the church give us names that they knew; we had several retired ministers in our church who were helpful in obtaining the names of some potential candidates. None of these potential candidates were contacted until well into the selection process. What we had decided to do was obtain during the first approximately two to three months as many potential candidates as possible and begin classifying them into three categories. The three categories would include, (1) the committee, (2) somewhat likely to meet the churches criteria and (3) not likely to meet the churches criteria. We successfully obtained approximately forty-seven (47) potential candidates and divided them into the three categories.

While this was going on the committee, at the church's monthly business meeting, submitted reports of its progress.

At the same time, on about November 1, 1978, the Ministerial Relations Committee of the Deacons recommended that Dr. Paul S. James be called as interim pastor, effective immediately. Dr. James did accept the call. This was a very significant and important event in the church during this period when we were in the pastor selection process. Dr. James is an example of a retired Baptist minister who seems to have talent to keep and pull people together while serving as an interim pastor. He is a very distinguished and competent pastor of many years and has held several successful pastorates. The church was very fortunate to have his services which relieved the Pastor Selection Committee of feeling pressed for an immediate and perhaps hasty decision.

Shortly after we obtained all the names of the potential candidates a letter was sent to the persons who were in the first category of most likely to meet the criteria of the selection of a pastor, asking them whether or not they would wish the committee to consider them as a prospective pastor. This was the first notice that they had actually been under consideration. Only one candidate had yet been heard at his church by two committee members. Appropriate responses were received from a number of potential candidates and from the list of those in the first category the committee narrowed the field down to approximately fifteen (15). From those fifteen we then began a second selection process to evaluate how many of those fifteen we would actually have members of the committee to go to that candidate's church. We divided the categories up into three divisions A, B and C, the A category was that which we would most likely be willing to have the committee members visit his church to hear him preach. The second category would be, the likely to and the third category, not likely.

We then began focusing in on the visiting to the church of the potential candidates by members of the committee. During this period of time the committee was meeting every Tuesday night to evaluate resumes, visits and other information connected with persons being considered. We began to plan our trips for the churches where the most likely prospects were.

A significant amount of our time was spent in prayer and at the committee meetings. When we were not in committee meetings, we specifically requested prayer every Sunday and every Wednesday of the church members for our efforts. The excellent job done by the chairman of our committee on the methods and planning was such that there was no problems about the work of the committee. As the work progressed, we began going out in teams of twos to hear the various prospects. The trips included places in Central Florida, Georgia and Tennessee. When the trip was made the persons who went would come back and make an oral and submit a written report of what they heard and saw from the visit.

The author had the opportunity to make the first visit along with his wife and another member of the committee, who was a Deacon, and his wife, to the man ultimately selected as our pastor, Dr. Frank Thomas. Dr. Thomas was, at that time, serving as the Pastor of the First Baptist Church of Tavares and

was a Stetson University graduate. He, also, was a Southern Seminary graduate where he received his Masters and Doctorate of Philosophy Degrees. That first visit took place on Sunday, October 22, 1978.

So the committee undertook its work fairly rapidly and was well organized within three months after they undertook to start the work. The reports which we brought back included things such as, the size of the auditorium where the candidate was serving and the approximate attendance of the people. We were able to obtain information about a general budget and their building fund and other things from the bulletin itself and announcements at the church which we presented back to the committee. We also discussed in our report the topic of the sermon and how we evaluated his presentation. We learned some specifics about the preacher from this first trip that was very significant. Other trips were made by other members to the other locations and they did the same.

After all of the trips were made and we began to evaluate the five most likely candidates we began focusing in on our choice.

At a committee meeting in December, 1978, we were fairly sure of who the final five choices were going to be from the list of the original forty-seven. There was a slight delay because one of the leading prospects had problems in arranging to come to Cocoa for a personal interview with us, which was the next stage.

We, then, provided the candidates with a written summary of the history of First Baptist Church of Cocoa, a list of the names and addresses of all former church staff members for the previous ten years, a study of our church by Dr. Don Hammer of Home Mission Board done 18 months earlier, a copy of the church approved long range plan and church budget information.

The candidates that came were, with the exception of the one from Tennessee, interviewed by early January. We delayed until late January to see if we could arrange for the fellow from Tennessee to come down and interview with us, but he was unable to make it so we proceeded without interviewing him. In the meantime, the entire committee had gone to hear the first candidate, who was Dr. Frank Thomas, our current pastor who was preaching at Tavares. It was close enough and convenient enough that they could go at various times. By this time his church knew that he was being visited by a pulpit committee and therefore it was no longer a secret. The other committee members brought back their written reports as well as reports from other candidates which were visited at their churches.

The committee spent a good bit of time and effort in these visitations. When we had now narrowed the choice down to four people, we began in a very deeply moving and prayerful meeting in February to begin the evaluation and selection process from the first four candidates. We were all asked to take the four names and using the evaluation steps that were outlined by the church and considering the biblical guidelines and the evaluation form which I had prepared, the committee came up with a choice. Of the four names before the committee, Dr. Frank Thomas was unanimously selected. His evaluation was clearly higher than the next choice although the next three were very close in sequence. It appears that the Holy Spirit had led us to this man by unanimous decision. At that meeting and after the selection process was finished, we spent considerable amount of time in prayer. The committee concluded that all of us had never served in a church committee or function where we felt closer to the Holy Spirit of God in our efforts and work than this one. There was no question in our minds that the man we were going to issue an invitation to preach, with a potential to the call, was God's choice to our church.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, we undertook to arrange for a series of meetings and to set up written contractual terms and conditions for a call. The schedule of meetings included, of course, meeting with the Pastor Selection Committee. It included arriving in town on a Friday and staying through Sunday. It included a meeting with the committee on Friday evening and dinner with the prospective pastor and his wife. Prior to

coming the committee sent much material to Dr. Thomas concerning the Cocoa area, including real estate guides, recreation facilities, our church pictorial directory, Chamber of Commerce information, etc.

We encouraged Dr. Thomas to discuss with us what the church expected of a pastor, his and the church's attitude toward missions and the role of the laity of the church.<sup>4</sup>

On Saturday morning the candidate and his wife began with meeting with the active Deacons at 8:30, Women's Missionary Union and Brotherhood at 9:30, the Stewardship Council at 10:45, the Sunday School Council and Church Training Council at 11:30 then lunch and then a meeting with the Church Council at 1:30. Then there was time allowed for the prospective pastor and his wife for the rest of the day so that they could just visit and drive around the area. Then on Sunday the prospective pastor preached the Sunday Morning Service. There was a luncheon for them at a committee member's house. Then there was a get acquainted church fellowship from 4:00 to 5:00 which the church hostess put on at the church. Next was supper with Betty and Joe Moss at their home. Then, he preached the Sunday Evening Service.

At the meeting with the Pastor Selection Committee on Friday the details of a potential call were discussed, including what the prospective pastor would like included in the terms and conditions of any call. We also had some very informative and helpful information from retired pastors in our church as well as our director of missions of the Brevard Baptist Association and other active pastors in the area as sources available to us as we developed conditions of call which the candidate could accept.

After that weekend we subsequently continued the prayer and at a special called business meeting on March 14th, three days after he had visited with us, the Pastor Selection Committee brought the recommended conditions for call to the congregation of the church at a Wednesday business meeting. The reason it was to be done at the Wednesday business meeting is that while we did not anticipate there would be opposition to the call of this man because reception was so well received for him and his wife and we knew the Holy Spirit was behind it, but some of the members felt that some of the terms of this call were subject to discussion by the congregation. So the special business meeting that Wednesday night allowed the discussion of the forms which were to be separate and apart from the issue of call. The call was to be voted on at a special business meeting on a Sunday morning on March the 18th after the regular church service.

So the recommendations of the special-called business meeting were submitted. It included giving the pastor the full pastoral responsibilities for staff and lay leadership as the church and pastor deemed wise. That for time away from the church field, the pastor would receive fourteen (14) days for the first two years and thereafter twenty-one (21) days' vacation per year. That we would be permitted and encouraged to attend the State Convention, the Southern Baptist Convention and Evangelistic Conferences at actual expenses for the pastor and his wife both. That he would be permitted to conduct revivals out-side the church for other churches, so long as it did not exceed two (2) weeks per year. That we encouraged his continuing education by providing time off of up to four (4) weeks per year. That the only limitation would be that the total time away not exceed seven (7) Sundays per year for the first two years and eight (8) Sundays per year thereafter. The compensation package included \$24,000 annually, which was an increase of what he was receiving at his present church, and was about \$3,300 more than we had been paying our previous pastor. The church agreed to provide a loan up to \$8,000 interest free for Dr. Thomas to purchase a home. All moving costs were to be paid by the church.

Those recommendations for the call were thoroughly discussed and the pros and cons were heard, but there was no vote taken on the call, only on the terms of the call. One hundred and nine (109) people were present at the Wednesday business meeting and the votes were counted and showed that the terms of the call carried almost unanimously. Subsequent to that, at the business meeting conducted at the

conclusion of the Sunday Morning Worship Service on March 18, 1979, the church voted on whether to issue a call to Dr. Frank H. Thomas on the terms presented at the business meeting on Wednesday night. A written ballot was taken of which there was two hundred and sixteen (216) yes votes and (1) negative vote on calling of Dr. Frank Thomas as pastor. Shortly thereafter the chairman called Dr. Thomas at his home in Tavares about the offer and call. He agreed to call us back after he had further chance to talk to his wife and pray about it. The subsequent letter was sent by the chairman to confirm in writing the offer and call, a subsequent letter was returned by Dr. Thomas accepting the call. His letter of acceptance was published in the next church bulletin and he began his work at First Baptist Church on Sunday, April 29, 1979. On May 6, 1979 an installation service was conducted in which Dr. Frank H. Thomas, Jr. was formally installed and that service of installation included the welcome by the pastor emeritus, Dr. James A. Sawyer, Jr. who had served our church twenty-seven (27) years 1940 to 1967. The service included a dedication and rededication of the pastor to the people and the people to the pastor which the committee felt was a significant and important step in the selection process and the culmination of the Holy Spirit's guidance of this pastor to this church.<sup>5</sup>

At the time that the committee completed its assignment and made its final report and sought discharge we looked back, and we the committee as a whole informed the church, that never had any of us on that committee ever been so completely positive of the lord's guidance. We knew that this was a man called of God to serve our church because of the guidance of the Holy Spirit to each and every committee member on the committee and the loving and caring and close relationship that existed between the committee members in all of the efforts of the selection of Dr. Frank Thomas as pastor.

As historical even in our church, this selection process was significant and successful so that its procedures are commended for any future needs of our church.

The author of this report does not hesitate to recommend it to any Southern Baptist Church.

#### Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph R. Moss, "Selection of a Church Pastor," (August, 1979) *unpublished*.

<sup>2</sup> "The Pastor Selection Committee," published by The Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, (1977).

<sup>3</sup> George M. Ingram, "When a Pulpit Committee Goes Looking!" *The Baptist Program*.

<sup>4</sup> James H. Landes, "The Pulpit Committee," *Faith Extras*.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas J. Brannon and Charles H. Rabon, "The Pastor's Installation: A Time of Recommitment."