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Phone: (904) 396-0396 Fax: (904) 396-4441 Cserve: 70420,73

June 15, 1992

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SBC denounces homosexuality,  
embraces conservative agenda

SOUTHERN BAPTIST HISTORICAL  
LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES  
Historical Commission, SBC  
Nashville, Tennessee

By Greg Warner

INDIANAPOLIS (ABP) -- Southern Baptists denounced homosexuality in the strongest terms enroute to embracing a conservative social agenda during their annual meeting in Indianapolis June 9-11.

The welcoming remarks of Vice President Dan Quayle, who rallied Southern Baptist support for his campaign for "family values," set the conservative tone for the 135th yearly meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Messengers followed Quayle's lead by adopting conservative positions on homosexuality and a variety of other issues, from condom distribution to Freemasonry.

A total of 17,986 Southern Baptists registered as messengers for the Indianapolis meeting, which was quiet by recent standards. It was the farthest north that Southern Baptists have met since 1983 (Pittsburgh) and the smallest registration since 1984 (17,101).

Messengers confirmed not only the conservative social direction of the convention, but the conservative direction of its leadership. Houston pastor Edwin Young won easy election as SBC president, marking the 14th straight victory for the fundamental-conservative presidential candidate.

But the SBC's fundamental-conservative leaders failed to rein in one of their own -- Houston judge and SBC political strategist Paul Pressler -- whose nomination as a trustee of the SBC Foreign Mission Board was approved easily despite behind-the-scenes opposition from top leaders of the movement he founded.

That movement, which has controlled SBC affairs since 1979, was reprimanded by outgoing FMB President Keith Parks who, in his final address to Southern Baptists, claimed that the past 13 years have been marked by a lack of love, not evangelistic advance.

It was the issue of homosexuality, however, that occupied center stage this year.

Unlike other American denominations which have struggled for consensus on the homosexual issue, the Southern Baptist Convention -- by the vote of messengers in Indianapolis -- left no doubt that homosexual behavior and churches that condone it are unacceptable.

Messengers voted overwhelmingly June 9 to exclude any church that affirms homosexuality from participating in the SBC, marking the first time that a moral issue has been used to limit membership in the 147-year-old denomination.

And messengers went further by inserting anti-homosexuality language into the SBC constitution, which previously only looked at financial contributions to the SBC in determining church participation.

In the future, and if the constitutional amendment is ratified for a second time next year, no local church will be considered in "friendly cooperation" with the convention -- and therefore able to participate in SBC affairs -- if it acts "to affirm, approve or endorse homosexual behavior."

The change was approved despite warnings it departs from the traditional relationship between the convention and its churches and that it opens the door for excluding congregations over a variety of moral issues.

The SBC action was directed at two North Carolina churches -- Pullen Memorial Baptist Church in Raleigh, which earlier this year blessed a marriage-like union between two homosexuals, and Olin T. Binkley Memorial Church in Chapel Hill, which licensed a homosexual divinity student to the gospel ministry.

Those actions "are contrary to the teachings of the Bible on human sexuality," the messengers said in a second motion in which they withdrew fellowship from the two churches.

SBC leaders disagreed on the significance of the action.

James Guenther, the SBC's attorney, said the action represents a "historic" change in ecclesiology for the denomination. "It is hard to overestimate the significance of this change," said Guenther of Nashville, Tenn.

But Richard Land, executive director of the SBC Christian Life Commission, said the change does not involve an "ecclesiological question" since the SBC has always had the power to discipline churches but hasn't used it. "If you had the power to do it, how does it change anything when you do it?" he asked.

Vice President Dan Quayle recruited SBC support for his own moral campaign against the nation's "cultural elite" during a welcoming address at the convention's opening session June 9.

In his address, which included references to his much-maligned "Murphy Brown" speech, Quayle said family values are basic to American society and essential to its survival. But they are also open to ridicule from the country's "cultural elite," he warned.

"Talk about right and wrong, and they'll try to mock us in newsrooms, sitcom studios and faculty lounges across America," Quayle said. "But in the heart of America, in the homes and workplaces and churches, the message is heard. A sense of moral decency runs deep in the American people.... And that's why I say this about the scorn of the media elite -- I wear their scorn as a badge of honor."

The vice president, who is President Bush's point man in the campaign for re-election, called for Southern Baptists to "speak up for the family, family values and the values and principles that make America great." He did not specifically define those principles, but his speech cited faith, family, fidelity, freedom, modesty, integrity, honor, duty, goodness and love.

Quayle praised Southern Baptists for defending those values, saying they too "know what it's like to bear the brunt of ridicule" for unpopular positions.

In their own presidential election, Southern Baptists tapped Young, pastor of Second Baptist Church in Houston, maintaining fundamental-conservative dominance of the SBC's political process.

Young, who carried the endorsement of top fundamental-conservative leaders, defeated fellow fundamental-conservative Nelson Price and a non-aligned candidate, Jess Moody, on the first ballot with 62 percent. Moody, a pastor from suburban Los Angeles, got 21 percent and Price, an Atlanta-area pastor, collected 16 percent.

In other officer elections, two evangelists were elected as vice

presidents -- Jay Strack of Dallas, first vice president by acclamation, and Joe Aulds of Ruston, La., second vice president in a runoff.

Lee Porter of Panama City, Fla., SBC registration secretary for 15 years, won re-election over Oklahoma pastor Bob Bender. Nashville businessman David Atchison was elected to a second term as recording secretary by acclamation.

Paul Pressler, the most powerful figure in the SBC's fundamental-conservative movement, turned back the most serious challenge to his leadership by easily winning election to a trustee post at the Foreign Mission Board.

Messengers defeated a substitute nominee by an estimated two-to-one margin, despite the fact most top leaders of the fundamental-conservative movement were opposed to Pressler's nomination. The election was described as a struggle for control of the movement's direction.

The alternate nomination did not come from fundamental-conservative leaders, however. Instead Cleeta John Rogers of Oklahoma City, Okla., nominated his brother, Eugene Rogers, a deacon in Park Cities Baptist Church in Dallas.

Pressler described the victory as "overwhelming" and later complained that a Baptist Press news release downplayed the vote margin and cast him in a negative light. After Pressler threatened to fire the director of Baptist Press, a revised version of the story was later released.

The address by FMB President Keith Parks was one of the few disturbances in an otherwise tranquil annual SBC meeting. Parks warned that 13 years of denominational controversy have diverted Southern Baptists from their primary purpose of sharing the gospel. "Has the controversy accelerated our purpose of sharing the gospel with the world?" Parks asked. "I would have to answer 'no!'"

An estimated 200 people -- including former SBC president Adrian Rogers -- walked out in apparent protest during Parks' annual address, the last he will deliver after 13 years as FMB president. Parks will retire early this fall because of philosophical differences with FMB trustees over how to do missions work overseas.

Although the SBC was created for the purpose of missions, now many more people are present to elect an SBC president than to hear the annual missions reports, Parks told messengers in the largely empty Hoosier Dome. That suggests "current messengers do not consider missions as our primary purpose," he charged.

At a time of unprecedented responsiveness to the Christian message worldwide, Parks said, "we are killing our witness." "I tremble that we as Southern Baptists are so fragmented, so full of anger, so short on love, we may be passed while God finds someone else."

In other issues, messengers authorized a study of the "compatibility" of Masonic teachings "with Christianity and Southern Baptist doctrine." The proposal passed easily after messengers amended the original motion in order to instruct the HMB -- instead of a special SBC committee -- to conduct the study.

Neither the Home Mission Board president nor the man who introduced the original motion were pleased with the decision to ask the Home Mission Board to conduct the study. HMB President Larry Lewis said his agency will draw ire regardless of its findings, and that will hurt HMB missions.

Larry Holly, the Texas physician who introduced the motion, said two previous requests for the HMB to study Freemasonry have produced unsatisfactory results.

In a 1985 study, the HMB's interfaith witness department concluded Freemasonry is not a religion or cult, and on that basis declined to critique it. Holly says Freemasonry is a secret, satanic, cultic order that teaches that other religions are as valid as Christianity.

Fred McPeake, a Masonic leader from Knoxville, Tenn., disagreed with Holly's assessment of Freemasonry. "It is not a religion, nor is it a substitute for religion, nor is it a false religion," said McPeake. "It is not in conflict with the Baptist faith."

Messengers later adopted a resolution containing thinly veiled criticism of Freemasonry. The resolution calls on Christians to avoid membership in any group "which conflicts with clear biblical teaching, including those teachings concerning the taking of oaths, the secrecy of activities, mystical knowledge or racial discrimination."

The convention passed a total of 15 resolutions, including one that cautions SBC agencies against participating in programs which "compromise support of the Cooperative Program" -- an apparent reference to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, a moderate-conservative organization that allows churches to bypass the Cooperative Program and other SBC funding channels.

Other resolutions positioned the SBC against condom distribution in schools, against letting homosexuals serve as Boy Scout leaders, against medical research involving fetuses from elective abortions, against euthanasia and assisted suicide, and against TV programs and ads that "glorify sexual promiscuity, violence and other forms of immorality."

In other resolutions, messengers voted for biblical language that refers to God in masculine terms, for the U.S. government to accommodate religious expression in public schools, for religious freedom for Middle East Christians, and for stepped-up evangelism in Eastern Europe.

The resolutions committee declined to act on dozens of other proposed resolutions, including ones denouncing the new Elvis Presley stamp and the use of sequined clothing in worship.

Messengers closed a chapter of Southern Baptist history by voting to end their 50-year-old relationship with the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs. In contrast to previous decisions concerning the BJC, the vote drew no discussion and little opposition.

Messengers also overwhelmingly rejected a request from the Washington-based religious-liberty agency for binding arbitration to settle a dispute over who owns a \$300,000 capital-needs fund that has been in the name of the BJC for the past 28 years. The BJC may sue.

Among the many messages of the week was the last presidential address from Morris Chapman of Wichita Falls, Texas, who soon will move from the highest elected position in the SBC to the highest employed position -- president-treasurer of the SBC Executive Committee.

In a reference to Southern Baptists displeased with the SBC's 13-year conservative trend, Chapman urged the others "not (to) be distracted" by those who would "hijack our heritage."

Calling the SBC a "denomination of destiny," Chapman said, "We will not...be deterred from the mission God has called us to accomplish for his own glory."

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-- This story includes information from Marv Knox, Trennis Henderson, Robert Dilday and Mark Wingfield.

Does SBC action on homosexuality  
portend scrutiny of local churches?

By Greg Warner

INDIANAPOLIS (ABP) -- Southern Baptists will have to "wait and see" if their decision to exclude churches that affirm homosexuality indicates their

national convention now will exert more influence over local churches, according to church historian Bill Leonard.

"It depends on if this sets a precedent or is a one-time action," said Leonard, chairman of the religion department at Samford University in Birmingham, Ala.

Messengers to the Southern Baptist Convention voted overwhelmingly June 9 to amend their constitution to exclude any church that approves homosexuality from participating in the SBC.

The decision marks the first time that a moral issue has been used to limit membership in the 147-year-old denomination.

The constitution previously only looked at financial contributions to the SBC in determining church participation. If the amendment is ratified for a second time next year, no local church will be considered in "friendly cooperation" with the convention if it acts "to affirm, approve or endorse homosexual behavior."

The SBC action was directed at two North Carolina churches, one which blessed a marriage-like union between two homosexuals and another which licensed a homosexual divinity student to the gospel ministry.

Leonard and other historians agree the SBC is well within its rights to determine what is tolerable within its fellowship and to expel churches that deviate from acceptable behavior and doctrine.

That power existed without the constitutional amendment, however. In fact, SBC messengers ousted the two churches before amending the constitution. If the amendment wasn't necessary, some historians ask, was it wise?

Some observers say the action departs from the traditional relationship between the convention and its churches and opens the door for excluding congregations over a variety of moral issues.

"It is hard to overestimate the significance of this change," said James Guenther, the SBC's attorney. Although the SBC has always had the power to exclude churches, he said, "the convention has never thought an issue was so important as to look to the faith and order of a church" to determine SBC participation.

Will the Southern Baptist Convention punctuate its recent decision with "an exclamation point," indicating homosexuality is a uniquely serious issue that warrants unprecedented action, Leonard asked, or "a comma," indicating more items will be added to the list of unacceptable church actions?

Neither Guenther nor Leonard would predict which it will be.

But Richard Land, executive director of the SBC Christian Life Commission, said it is "highly unlikely" the SBC will soon add other moral restrictions to the constitution, since it took the denomination almost 150 years to exercise its exclusionary power for the first time.

Although SBC messengers did not debate that question at length before approving the amendment, members of the SBC Executive Committee argued both sides a day earlier. Ray Fuller, chairman of the committee that brought the proposal, said the committee knew of "no other issues contrary to the Bible" that had surfaced in churches. But when they do surface, he said, "we will come back and address those issues as well."

Possible targets of future SBC action could be churches that favor abortion rights or women's ordination.

Guenther suggested expelling the two churches represents a "historic" change in Southern Baptist ecclesiology. But Land disagreed. "If (the SBC) had the power to do it, how does it change anything when you do it?" asked Land, a church historian.

Land, whose agency addresses moral issues such as homosexuality, said local Baptist associations historically have exercised discipline over churches. When the denomination does the same, it is a difference only of scale, he said.

Leonard said the historic significance of the action depends on what happens next -- if it is a precedent or a one-time departure from the norm.

"We'll have to wait and see," said Leonard, former professor of church history at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. "If it does become a precedent, heaven only knows where we will go."

Predicting the direction the SBC will take is made more difficult by other changes in the denomination, Leonard said, changes caused by more than a decade of theological/political turmoil. "This simply adds another facet to an already unstable denomination."

Land said the SBC chose to use its power to expel for the first time because of the seriousness of the offense. "There have never been two Southern Baptist churches who have so directly challenged basic Southern Baptist belief," he said. "They are the ones who forced the decision on Southern Baptists."

"In my adult lifetime, there has not been any issue that has had the breadth of support as this issue," he said.

But Leonard added a caution. "Why (only) homosexuality?" he asked. "Which sins are important enough?"

Baptists could follow the direction of Roman Catholics, who classified sins according to seriousness, he warned. While Southern Baptists easily agreed to make homosexuality a test of fellowship, there might not be consensus on a host of other issues. "We all have our list," Leonard said.

"I understand the intensity of this," he said of the homosexuality debate. But, he added, "I think it is important to look beyond this specific issue and see a broader issue."

"The potential is that, instead of remaining a convention (operating) on a national level, we become a synod and look more like a connectional denomination, where rulings and precedents made on a national level are passed down on a local level."

Leonard defined a synod as a representative legislative body that sets dogma for a group of churches that are united around a common tradition. Under congregational rule, which is the Baptist tradition, policy is set in the local congregation.

A trend toward connectionalism, if it develops, would reverse the "bottom up" tradition of Baptist polity with a "top down" polity, in which the actions of the national body set the pattern for local churches.

If that happens, expect to hear a cry of "foul" from advocates of local-church autonomy.

So far at least, Southern Baptists have not crossed that line, said Land. Just as the two North Carolina churches were free to affirm homosexuality, so was the SBC free to withdraw fellowship from them, he said. "No one has tried to interfere with local-church polity."

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