

# Associated Baptist Press

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## **Clinton says Bible, faith influence his decisions**

By Marv Knox

WASHINGTON (ABP) — President Bill Clinton prays and studies the Bible as he makes tough decisions and copes with the isolation of the presidency, he told a group of Baptist editors and denominational leaders Oct. 3.

Obviously stung by conservative religious critics and what he called "the brutal polarization of debate" on moral issues, the president decried the meanness that has characterized those debates. And he wondered aloud why other Christians have not defended him from harsh personal attacks by religious critics.

During the visit, organized by the Washington-based Baptist Joint Committee, Clinton, a Southern Baptist, was asked how his faith informs his decisions. Contrary to his critics' claims, Clinton said, he bases decisions regarding his administration's thorniest issues -- such as abortion and homosexuality -- on Scripture, as well as science and law.

"When I have some big decision and no one else can make it and my advisers are split, I try to spend a lot of quiet time, and I pray a lot about those things," said Clinton, a member of Immanuel Baptist Church in Little Rock, Ark., who has received some of his sharpest criticism from fellow Southern Baptists.

"Even more important is the kind of guidance I try to get on a daily basis. Since I've been here, I've spent a lot more time than I ever have in my life reading religious books. ... And it's made a huge difference, actually, in enduring what is the pretty significant isolation of this job."

In the larger scheme of things, managing the difficulties of his daily routine is more strenuous than handling the high-profile issues, Clinton said. But he grew animated discussing the "demonization" he had received at the hands of TV preachers such as Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson. Their access to the public through regular TV programs supersedes his own, Clinton said, because his statements must pass through the filter of the Washington news media.

He also expressed frustration that he hasn't had more help in fending off the verbal thrashings of Robertson, Falwell and others. "I have been surprised that they haven't been held accountable by other people."

The challenge for Christians, Clinton said, is to infuse the public debate with moral concerns "and still resist the temptation to demonize the opposition." Repeated a theme of other recent meetings with religious leaders, he lamented that debates over serious moral issues often are reduced to screaming matches. "If these problems were easy

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Nashville, Tennessee

and could be screamed away, they would be solved already," he said.

Two issues that continue to prompt thrashings from conservative Christians are abortion and homosexuals in the military.

About abortion, Clinton noted, "The real issue is not whether you think abortion is wrong or not, but whether government ought to criminalize the conduct in all cases."

The U.S. Supreme Court's landmark abortion case, Roe vs. Wade, essentially maintained government cannot penalize a mother or her doctor for an abortion performed before the fetus is viable outside the womb, he said. That decision reflects the absence of a national consensus on when human life begins, Clinton noted.

"Until I know something from science or I feel the Scriptures are totally unambiguous, as a Christian, I must uphold the law," he added. "I have read all the verses cited by people who say that it is self-evident that the Scripture is against abortion and we should criminalize the conduct of mothers and doctors. I simply don't believe they're so free of ambiguity that you can say, 'Well, the only answer to this is to overturn the (Roe) decision by constitutional amendment.'"

Two conservative critics said Clinton is misreading the Bible.

"I am willing to give the president the benefit of the doubt when he says his faith is informing his policies," said James Smith, director of government relations for the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission, "but I am not willing to say he has properly applied his faith on several moral issues" -- including abortion and homosexuality. "The Bible gives us very clear direction on where to come down on those issues."

Noting Clinton claimed to be against abortion while governor of Arkansas, Smith suggested political expediency, not faith, has reshaped Clinton's position on abortion. "This president has not said 'no' yet to the abortion lobby," Smith charged.

Conservative columnist Cal Thomas said criminalization of abortion "is not the issue at all. Only a tiny fraction of the people in this country wants abortion outlawed in every case." He also disagreed with Clinton's claim that the Bible is ambiguous on abortion. "I'd like to know what verses are ambiguous," he said.

But Thomas conceded Clinton's critics have gone too far. "Some of the stuff I've seen comes very close, if not over the line, to bearing false witness," he said.

Thomas declined to criticize Falwell, with whom he worked to organize the Moral Majority. But he said: "There are too many visible preachers who have allowed themselves to be seduced by the kingdom of this world, rather than [preaching about] the kingdom of God."

Clinton told the Washington gathering that abortion has been one of his abiding concerns. "I work on this issue. I've read a lot of pro-life literature. I'm not for the number of abortions we have today. So, there are only two things to do -- reduce the rate of unwanted pregnancies ... and do something about adoption."

The administration is addressing the first concern through education, he said. And it's also "trying to get a law through Congress loosening the restrictions on cross-race adoptions," he added.

Clinton said his position on abortion essentially matches the one taken by the Southern Baptist Convention in a 1971 resolution, which supports abortion in cases of rape, incest, fetal deformity and to protect the health of the mother. Stricter views have been expressed by SBC resolutions since conservatives took control of the convention in 1979. "Did we learn something about the Bible in the last 23 years?" Clinton asked.

The CLC's Smith said Clinton's position does square with the SBC's position in 1971, and that is a "travesty." "In 1971 Southern Baptists were leading the way in abortion on demand," he said. "Before Roe vs. Wade, we had a more radical position on abortion than the Supreme Court."

Gays in the military is the other issue that alienated Clinton from many conservative Christians. "The question is this: If you're in government and acknowledge the existence of homosexual people, does that mean you affirm the lifestyle? My answer is no," he said.

The military's current "don't ask; don't tell" homosexual policy actually reflects the stance taken by the armed services before the early 1980s, when recruiters began asking volunteers if they were gay, he reported.

"My position, embraced by the most decorated veterans of the Vietnam War in Congress, is that people ought to be judged not by what they are or say, but what they do," he said. "If they're guilty of misconduct, throw them out."

His position is more conservative, intellectually honest and fair than his opponents' position, he claimed.

His perspective differed from his military leaders, he admitted, but they were "dealing with the psyches of the [soldiers] who are not homosexual," while he was concerned with protecting the rights of minorities.

"We ought to apply the same standard to all," Clinton said. "If you play by the rules, work hard and pay taxes, you ought to be able to serve. ...

"God created everybody, made everybody a sinner, imperfect. The United States has a Constitution that says all sinners should be treated equally."

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-- Greg Warner contributed to this article.

## Clinton tells government lawyers to monitor religious-freedom law

By Mark Wingfield

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- President Clinton has ordered every government agency to appoint someone on its legal staff to monitor application of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, according to White House Deputy Counsel Joel Klein.

Klein announced the president's latest directive Oct. 3 at a briefing for Baptist editors and religious-liberty specialists held in the Old Executive Office Building. Clinton also spoke to the group, but he focused on other issues.

Implied in the directive is the president's concern that all government agencies work to support free religious expression rather than hinder it. Klein said the administration wants to "elevate religious freedom to a central civil right."

There is a limit to what government can do on issues of religious expression, Klein said. But enforcing RFRA is one way government can be a "great facilitator" of religious freedom, he said.

RFRA says that before government can "substantially burden" the free exercise of religion, government must show that its action serves a "compelling governmental interest" and is the least-restrictive means of furthering that interest."

Fostering understanding of RFRA among government officials is essential, Klein said, because legal challenges to the statute are just beginning.

"The first critical case under the statute," Klein said, is a pending bankruptcy case in Minnesota, which involves an attempt to take back the tithes a bankrupt Christian couple paid to their church. The Justice Department had taken a position against the couple. But a last-minute directive from Clinton forced the Justice Department to reverse its position in the case Sept. 16.

Although Clinton has been a strong supporter of RFRA, which he signed into law last November, Justice Department officials apparently did not factor the new law into their decision to support creditors' claims against the couple's church in the tithing case. In a rare intervention, the president told Attorney General Janet Reno that her staff had adopted too "narrow" a view of RFRA that could harm future interpretation of the law.

Klein said the Clinton administration was unaware of the Justice Department's position in the case until after the department filed its brief in support of the creditors. After later meeting with church-state attorneys, including Brent Walker of the Baptist Joint Committee, administration officials stepped in and instructed the Justice Department to withdraw its support.

Strictly interpreted, current bankruptcy law allows creditors to seek return of certain money given to charity. But Clinton, and numerous religious-liberty experts, argued that RFRA protects churches from such exposure because government has no "compelling interest" to warrant restricting the right of Christians to worship God through giving tithes and offerings.

Assigning lawyers at each government agency to monitor RFRA compliance will ensure "that they own the issue," Klein said, and prevent some future problems.

But many other challenges to religious freedom remain, he said. "RFRA is not a free ride for us."

Klein's prediction is supported by the history of another landmark religious-liberty law, the Equal Access Act, passed by Congress in 1984.

Equal Access says if public schools allow any extra-curricular groups to meet on school grounds during non-class times, they also must allow student-initiated religious groups the same privilege. The act most often is cited to protect student Bible clubs and prayer groups.

But 10 years after its passage, many school administrators still don't understand the requirement of equal access, said Steven McFarland, director of the Christian Legal Society's Center for Law and Religious Freedom. McFarland also addressed the editors' briefing.

McFarland cited three court cases from the past year that have been pivotal in interpreting the Equal Access Act. In each situation, school administrators have attempted to skirt the requirements of the act through minor technicalities.

However, the act has withstood numerous legal challenges and was upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court in the 1990 case of *Westside Community Schools vs. Mergens*, McFarland noted.

He said most of the problems with applying the Equal Access Act have come from a "knee-jerk reaction among many school administrators that if it's religious, it's got to be kicked out."

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## **Churches to be affected by new tax reporting laws**

By Mark Wingfield

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Although tax time is still months away, church financial secretaries should be preparing to help donors comply with new tax laws related to charitable giving, two IRS employees advised.

Effective Jan. 1, 1994, any single contribution of \$250 or more to a charity must be substantiated in writing by that charity. The documentation also must indicate whether the donor received any goods or services in exchange for the contribution.

Because of this new law, church officials will want to get out donor statements as soon as possible each quarter or at year-end, said Karin Gross, a senior technician reviewer with the IRS chief counsel. Gross and Howard Schoenfeld, IRS special assistant for exempt organizations, spoke to a briefing of Baptist editors in Washington Oct. 2.

The two said the IRS already has received numerous phone calls about the changes, many from people who have misunderstood the new law.

Here are highlights of their explanations:

– Deductibility is not changed. The new law relates only to documentation of deductions, not what may be counted as a tax deduction.

– The law affects only single contributions of \$250 or more. To illustrate, consider two people who both give \$5,200 annually to their churches. One person gives \$100 every week to the church and therefore is not affected by

the new law. The other person gives \$433 once each month, and therefore is affected by the new law.

-- Documentation is required. Before filing a tax return, a donor must obtain from the church a statement which lists all contributions of \$250 or more and reports any goods or services given to the donor in return. A donor's cancelled checks will not be considered adequate documentation because they do not indicate whether any goods or services were received in return.

-- Compliance is the goal. Upon request of Congress, the IRS wants to eliminate charitable deductions claimed wrongly. That's why the no-goods-or-services requirement is key to the new law. For example, a person might pay the church more than \$250 to participate in a mission trip. That payment differs from a regular tithe or offering, which is given without expecting to receive any goods or services in return. For the mission trip, the money paid is not a contribution to the church but provides lodging, food and transportation services.

-- Mixed gifts have a different standard. Payments to a church of more than \$75 that are part charity and part payment for goods and services must be reported and documented as such. For example, should a church hold a fund-raiser where individuals pay \$100 to attend a concert, the donor could deduct as a contribution only the amount of that \$100 that didn't cover the value of the concert. So if tickets otherwise would have cost \$20, the donor may deduct only \$80 as a charitable contribution, and the church's documentation must note this distinction.

-- Timeliness counts. Documentation of charitable gifts required under the new law must be received by the donor before the tax return is filed. For example, a donor may not file a return claiming the deductions on Feb. 1, although not receiving documentation from the church until March 1.

-- There is no standard format. The IRS has no standard format churches must use to report contributions. Any form will suffice, so long as it provides enough information to substantiate the amount of the deductible contribution and a statement about whether goods or services were received in return.

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## Three Southern presidents view Abstract differently

By Marv Knox

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- Historic changes at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary turn on a new understanding of the seminary's theological statement, according to the presidents who have led the school during the past 43 years.

The Abstract of Principles has been Southern Seminary's confession of faith since its founding in 1859. Using the Abstract as a theological fence around the seminary's interpretation of truth, the president can move for the dismissal of faculty he believes step out of bounds.

That's important in the current Southern Baptist Convention context. New President Al Mohler was installed last year by trustees hand-picked to take the SBC's oldest seminary in a more conservative direction. Southern Baptists who elected those trustees have charged the seminary with liberalism and declared it must be turned to the right.

Mohler should have an easier time than his predecessors in removing faculty, due to his understanding of the purpose and use of the Abstract.

Mohler believes the Abstract is a clear and rigid statement of theological truth that should be followed to the letter. His predecessors during the previous four decades, Duke McCall (1951-82) and Roy Honeycutt (1982-93), also believe it is straightforward, but they view its enforcement more flexibly.

In a recent series of interviews, the presidents agreed the Abstract exists to define the seminary's theological boundaries and to articulate them to Southern Baptists.

"The Abstract stands as a public statement of what is to be taught," noted Mohler. It is addressed to the

faculty, providing the parameters for their teaching; to the students, providing expectations of what is to be taught; and to the churches, explaining those expectations, he said.

"The Abstract provides the outer boundaries for those of us who work at the seminary," said McCall. "But it also provides protection for us" by safeguarding faculty and administrators from unwarranted attack.

Numerous seminary faculty have said they don't feel protected in the wake of the forced resignation of Molly Marshall, an associate professor of theology who has been accused of liberalism and exonerated for much of the past decade. Mohler accused her of teaching outside the Abstract -- although he offered no specifics publicly -- and told her to resign or he would initiate proceedings for removal.

Mohler's aggressive enforcement of a rigid Abstract sets his administration apart from McCall's and Honeycutt's.

The three agreed the president's first responsibility is to investigate charges of aberrant teaching. From there, McCall and Honeycutt parted company with their young successor.

"Should the issue represent a clear and consequential violation of the Abstract, the administration has no choice but to act," Mohler insisted.

"Sometimes the president's job is to protect a faculty member who is out of bounds long enough to get back in bounds or prove we need to move the boundary," McCall countered. "You would not clobber him as soon as he puts his toe over the line but act only when he demonstrated he was out and intended to stay out."

Furthermore, the Baptist principle of soul freedom dictates the president should give the faculty member some say in the decision, he added.

"I not only used my interpretation, but would look at the interpretation given by a faculty member who could say, 'I teach in accordance with the Abstract,'" he said. "Perhaps he might not teach precisely as I would have done. But I had to take his view into account."

As an example, McCall cited long conversations he had with the late theology professor Dale Moody, often accused of violating the Abstract on apostasy, or the ability to lose one's salvation.

Moody could "beat me over the head with his old Greek New Testament," citing numerous Scripture passages that supported Moody's view and convinced him he taught within the boundaries of the Abstract, McCall said.

McCall recalled a long winter meeting that ended with him telling Moody: "Here's a copy of the Abstract, and if you're going to teach this fall, I want you to sign it and acknowledge you are teaching within the Abstract. I really read you as over the border, but if you read yourself as within the border, then I will abide by that."

That approach is important because of the nature of academic freedom and the search for truth, McCall added.

"I saw academic freedom as the faculty not 'having the truth,' but exploring and 'seeking the truth,'" he said. "A professor might test whether a view is tenable or not, and the only way he can test it is to try it himself. He then may say, 'No, I can't live with that,' and he will give his students better guidance than he would if he had never tested it."

Honeycutt concurred: "You can't have a high-quality, low-risk faculty. That's an oxymoron of the first order.

"Some people assume we have all the truth nailed down. I don't know why they think a student should come (to seminary), except to learn to become a 'practitioner' in the worst sense of the word."

But under Mohler's administration, a professor does not have the right to disagree with the president and declare himself or herself within the boundaries of the Abstract.

If the president and a professor disagree, "one of us is right, and one of us is wrong," Mohler said. "The Abstract is not a diffuse and confusing document. I do not believe interpretation of the Abstract has been a problem. But the question is whether this institution will require professors to stand clearly within the meaning of the words."

Consequently, if the president "determines there is a violation of the Abstract, ... he has no choice but to forward that to the board of trustees," who can vote to remove the professor.

Although Mohler insisted he is not "judge, jury and executioner," he admitted that if he charged a professor with

violating the Abstract, the trustees probably would find the professor guilty.

"It is fair to say there is a remarkable consensus between the president and trustees on both the meaning and role of the Abstract," he said. "But that is a consensus that should exist."

However, Honeycutt said that's an assumption not borne out by history. "The process never assumed that kind of board" which would walk in lockstep with a president, he said. "There's never been a formal interpretation of the Abstract."

Nor should the Abstract be locked into a rigid, formal interpretation, he added.

"The Abstract is written in such a way that it is a living document," he said. Like all historic documents, it is shaped by the spirit of the times, subject to new understandings when new issues in succeeding periods put pressures on the old interpretations, he explained.

For example, the Abstract avoids comment on issues related to the Landmark Controversy, which raged at the time it was written, he said. And although the Abstract closely follows the Philadelphia Confession, its article on the Scriptures substitutes "authority" for "infallible" as a description of the Bible's nature.

"These beg the question, 'Why?'" Honeycutt said, answering, "It was written -- and documented in the biographies of (seminary founders) James Boyce and John Broadus -- to hold diverse churches together, not push them apart."

Mohler disputes that claim, saying that describes the purpose of the SBC's "Baptist Faith and Message" statement, but not the seminary's Abstract.

The "Baptist Faith and Message" was indeed designed to provide a rallying point for Southern Baptists, he said, but the Abstract was written to provide clear guidelines for faculty teaching.

He quotes Boyce, the first seminary president: "No difference, however slight, no peculiar sentiments, however speculative, is here allowable. His agreement with the standard should be exact."

Backed by the seminary's board of trustees, Mohler's understanding of the purpose of the Abstract makes his interpretation of its contents paramount: Faculty literally will stay or leave according to that interpretation.

"I certainly do not believe the founders of this institution believed the Abstract was an open door to reinterpretation," he charged. "I believe my interpretation of the Abstract is that of the founders themselves."

That's preposterous, contended Honeycutt. "To presume one can go back 130-plus years and read the minds of Boyce and (another founder, Basil) Manly is claiming omniscience reserved for God."

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## **Texas pastors opposed to proposed giving plan**

By Toby Druin

DALLAS (ABP) -- While work is complete on a proposal redefining missions giving for Texas Baptists, debate over the document is only increasing.

After hearing the concerns of a group of Texas Baptist pastors in late September, the chairman of the committee that drafted the proposal said he is willing to call together a small group of members of the committee to meet with critics.

About 20 pastors, led by Claude Thomas of First Baptist Church of Euless, met Sept. 27 with Cecil Ray, chairman of the Cooperative Missions Giving Study Committee, and two officials of the Baptist General Convention of Texas -- president Jerold McBride of San Angelo and Executive Director William Pinson.

Thomas said he called the meeting because the pastors wanted to express to Ray and Pinson that they do not

agree with the recommendations of the study committee, which will be presented at the state convention in Amarillo, Oct. 31. Those present and a few others who could not come, he said, lead churches which give almost \$9 million annually to the Cooperative Program.

The study committee will recommend to the Baptist General Convention of Texas this fall that Texas Baptist churches be considered "cooperating" churches -- and able to participate in convention business -- if they fund the BGCT, regardless of whether or not they fund Southern Baptist Convention causes.

Currently contributions from a "cooperating church" have to be unrestricted and are used to support the Cooperative Program budgets of the BGCT and the SBC. Gifts to other Baptist missions and ministries have been considered "designated" gifts.

Under the new plan, however, all such gifts would be counted as Cooperative Program funds, whether they support the SBC budget, other worldwide missions and ministries, or the BGCT alone. Other worldwide ministries could include the Baptist World Alliance or Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

"We feel that it is a radical departure from what we have popularly and scholastically known the Cooperative Program to be," Thomas said. "We believe it will unravel the greatest funding mechanism in the history of the church and are concerned that it will dismantle the unified budget of the Texas convention."

Rather than "enhancing missions giving," as the committee was charged to do, the proposal will do the opposite, Thomas said.

Two of the study committee members -- John Hatch, pastor of First Baptist Church in Lake Jackson, and Ralph Smith, pastor of Hyde Park Baptist Church in Austin -- were among the pastors' group and spoke against the committee recommendation. Both are part of a five-person group of the 22-member committee who have prepared a minority report asking that only gifts to the BGCT and SBC be considered "Cooperative Program."

Hatch said the committee recommendation "radically" changes the structure of what Texas Baptists consider to be the Cooperative Program, ends the partnership with the SBC, adds an undetermined number of "new partners," and will divide support rather than enhance it.

Smith agreed: "Whether it has been written down or not, the Cooperative Program has always been a partnership between the local church, the state convention and the Southern Baptist Convention."

Smith, a former president of the state convention, said that if he were ruling on the matter he would rule that the committee has not done what it was charged to do -- study and recommend ways to enhance cooperative missions giving.

Mike Dean, pastor of Travis Avenue Baptist Church in Fort Worth, asked that consideration be given to bringing the committee back together to consider other options to try to make it a "win/win" situation. If a divisive issue were coming before his local church, he said, he would move to head it off.

Ray said that while the recommendation is perceived as a radical change, it is not. It does not end the partnership with the SBC, nor does it create new ones, he said.

"The Cooperative Program has been an agreement between the state and the SBC," he said. "Our recommendation does not end that."

"It does only one radical thing. Churches have had a choice in the past to participate in the program in the full package or not, but the package belonged to the BGCT and the SBC. This new partnership recognizes the right of the church in the process. It grants the right to the church to say it can make a choice of what it will cooperate in."

Ray said he is open to a small group dialogue of three to four persons from the committee and a like number from the pastors to see if there is "a meeting of the minds."