

Associated Baptist Press

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Retired seminary prof criticizes creedal adherence to Abstract

DIAMONDHEAD, Miss. (ABP) -- A commitment by the president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary to demand adherence by faculty members to the school's 137-year-old Abstract of Principles will produce a dangerous "bondage to a mixture of truth and error," warns a retired faculty member at the school.

In an essay released to the press in December, Frank Stagg, professor emeritus and longtime New Testament teacher at the seminary in Louisville, Ky., criticized President Albert Mohler's commitment to the principles outlined in the document, which has been signed by every faculty member who has taught at the school since its founding in 1859.

Mohler, president since 1993, has said in public addresses and interviews that he regards the Abstract the "irreducible minimum" governing what is taught in the seminary's classrooms. Last summer, he asked for and received the resignation of theology professor Molly Marshall, whose teaching he charged fell outside the Abstract's boundaries.

Mohler's commitment to enforcing the Abstract has been criticized as a departure from recent history, where professors were allowed latitude for "private interpretation" in their affirmation to teach "in accordance with and not contrary to" the 20 doctrinal positions outlined in the Abstract.

Stagg said Mohler's intention to require teachers to adhere strictly to the statement is precisely what seminary's founders intended. However, that intent was "a major flaw" in the institution's founding, he charged.

The seminary's first president, James Boyce, viewed adherence to the Abstract as the "non-negotiable condition" for employment at the seminary, Stagg said. "No difference, however slight, ... is here allowable," Boyce

wrote at the time.

But Boyce mistakenly treated the Abstract itself as "inerrant," Stagg charged, and his strict use of it introduced creedalism into the Southern Baptist Convention.

In 1856, two years before the Abstract was written, Boyce outlined a vision for theological education that included both advanced scholarship that prepared ministers for research and writing and a commitment to an abstract of principles binding on all professors.

Those positions "were on a collision course from the outset," Stagg said, seeking to create an environment that encourages open inquiry for truth while at the same time trying to "shelter truth" through a creedal statement. Out of that tension grew a veiled threat that has haunted scholars throughout the seminary's history, he said.

Boyce failed to see that "an abstract can protect error as well as truth," Stagg said.

"'Back to Boyce' means teaching that God has chosen to give 'saving grace' to 'the elect' only," he said. "It means proclaiming 'outward calling' to all with 'effective calling' possible to those only whom God has chosen to give 'saving grace.'"

It also means "no women teaching theology to men" and "no women enrolled as students," said Stagg, pointing out that women were not allowed to even audit classes until 1900, after the four founders had died.

"If we now return to Boyce and the Abstract of Principles, it will be bondage to a mixture of truth and error, frustrating honest and competent search for truth, and excluding women," Stagg said.

Mohler, provided with a copy of Stagg's essay, responded in a written statement that Stagg is "certainly correct" that Boyce intended for the seminary to be a "creedal institution," but Mohler said he offers "no apology" for trying to keep the seminary theologically pure.

He said Stagg's admission that faculty members have adopted a "private interpretation" of the document, "contrary to Boyce's demand," indicates "a lack of integrity (that) is breathtaking."

"By his own boast, what (Stagg) really signed was a pledge to teach in accordance with the Abstract in so far as the Abstract suited his purposes," Mohler said. "Therefore, Dr. Stagg felt free to violate the Abstract's clear teachings on the Trinity, Election, The Fall of Man, Regeneration and Justification. He did so in published materials and in his classroom lectures."

Mohler called Stagg's references to the founders' views on Calvinism and women "a sad attempt to confuse the issue." Mohler defended Calvinism, and he said the issue of women is not addressed in the Abstract. "Women are fully admitted into all degree programs. Dr. Stagg knows this is the case," he said.

In his essay, Stagg opposed the use of creeds. "Creeds like the Abstract of Principles survive only by arbitrary power," he wrote. "Theological writings otherwise must live or die on their power to persuade."

Stagg said the seminary owes its allegiance not to Boyce, but "Jesus Christ as best we can understand the biblical witness to his word and his way."

"Our calling is not to inculcate creeds but to an inquiring faith," he said.

Mohler said he took a New Testament class taught by Stagg while he was a student at Southern Seminary and learned from the professor "not at all what he (Stagg) intended."

"I learned by observing Dr. Stagg that Dr. Boyce's demand for a regulative confession was more than justified," Mohler said. "For a theological seminary, all that stands between belief and unbelief, between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, integrity and compromise, is a clear statement of faith to which all who teach are accountable. For Southern Seminary, that is the Abstract of Principles."

Catholics hold clout in Congress, but Baptists fill top three posts

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- For the first time in history, the top three officials of the U.S. government are Baptists, but the nation's largest Protestant denomination ranks far behind Roman Catholics in terms of total clout in the 104th Congress.

Republican Congressman Newt Gingrich was elected Speaker of the House Jan. 4, placing a Southern Baptist third in succession to the presidency, behind Democratic President Bill Clinton and Vice President Al Gore, who also are members of churches affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention.

Gingrich belongs to New Hope Baptist Church in Fayetteville, Ga. Clinton is a member of Immanuel Baptist Church in Little Rock, Ark. Gore's church membership is at Mount Vernon Baptist Church in Alexandria, Va.

Overall in Congress, however, Baptists number 65, behind Catholics, with 148 adherents.

Thirty-three members of Congress describe their religious affiliation as Southern Baptist, while several others who also belong to Southern Baptist congregations are among the 24 Congress members described simply as Baptists. Five members are American Baptists, two are Missionary Baptists and one is an Independent Baptist.

Behind Baptist groups rank United Methodists with 63 members and Presbyterians with 62.

Per capita, the mainline Protestant churches are well represented. The 2.4 million-member Episcopal Church has 49 adherents in the 104th Congress, while the Assemblies of God, one of the fastest-growing denominations with 2.2 million members, has three.

There are more than 30 million Baptists in America, 8.7 million United Methodists and 4 million Presbyterians. The Roman Catholic Church claims 58 million members.

Thirty-four members of Congress are Jewish. Lutherans number 22, while 20 Congresspersons describe their religious affiliation as Protestant. The Mormons and United Church of Christ tie for the 10th largest bloc, with 13 members each.

Other denominations represented are: Christian, six; Eastern Orthodox and Unitarian, five each; Christian Science, four; African Methodist Episcopal, three; Churches of Christ, Congregational, Christian Reformed, Disciples of Christ and Seventh-Day Adventist with two, and Christian Missionary Alliance, Church of the Nazarene, Evangelical Covenant, Independent, Pan-African Orthodox Christian and United Brethren of Christ with one member.

Three members of Congress report no affiliation and one does not specify a religious preference.

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-- By Bob Allen

New Christian leader in China calls for end to Bible-smuggling

HONG KONG (ABP) -- A newly elected Chinese Christian official has called for an end to Bible-smuggling into China, saying it places believers in the nation at risk.

"To receive Bibles smuggled into the country is against the law," said Bao Jiayuan, newly elected associate general secretary of the China Christian Council. "Why should Chinese Christians risk their freedom for a foreign Bible when Bibles are legally available within China?" he said in a report in Ecumenical News International.

Each year, about 2.2 million Bibles are produced in China at the Amity Printing Press, a joint venture between the United Bible Societies and the CCC, the group recognized by the government in Beijing and which represents most Protestants in the country. Eventually, the number of Amity-published Bibles is expected to reach 4 million a year.

But the 10 million Bibles produced in China since 1980 are inadequate to meet the needs of China's "unregistered Protestants," estimated by some to number 20 million, say CCC critics. Some also mistrust the official church for its willingness to cooperate with communists.

"The CCC is just a government church. They don't like believers in the countryside to have the Bible, because they are afraid that these people may start their own church, away from them," charged Mark Szanderna of the Revival Christian Church, which claims to have delivered 300,000 Bibles to China last year.

Bao acknowledged that demand for Bibles in China exceeds supply, but he said Bibles smuggled to rural areas are subject to confiscation, while Bibles distributed by Amity Press are not.

"Please stop endangering Chinese Christians," Bao pleaded. "Let us work together to help them instead."

Szanderna said Chinese believers "are willing to pay the price" for smuggled Bibles and that his organization would be reluctant to work with the CCC. "We do not trust the government church," he said. "We want to supervise the process of Bible printing and distribution. We want to be in control."

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-- ABP staff

Baptist journalist casts hope on war-torn Croatia

By Pam Parry

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Journalist Boris Peterlin strives to see more than negative, conflict-oriented stories in print, but with a beat like Croatia, it is an elusive goal.

Peterlin, a Baptist and director of the Christian Information Service based in the Republic of Croatia, participated in an international peacemaking program that brought him to the United States in October. Sponsored by a Presbyterian peacemaking organization, he shared with congregations across the nation about the horrors and possible solutions to the carnage in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Peterlin concedes that accurate news coverage of atrocities, such as the slaying of 14,000 people in Sarajevo (10 percent of whom were children), is unavoidably and necessarily negative. That information must get out, he said, but news of positive initiatives by Christian organizations also should be reported.

Without some coverage of promising initiatives, the international media is creating a hopeless picture, he said.

A native of Zagreb, Peterlin formed CIS as a non-profit, non-government, ecumenical organization in the autumn of 1991. He wanted to bring to the world's attention the bloodshed and human-rights violations in Croatia. Now that he's got it, he would proffer some glimmers of hope.

Peterlin, a member of a Baptist church in Croatia, remembers well the summer of 1991 that affected his family and the former country of Yugoslavia. At the time he was an assistant professor at the Institute for Linguistical Research in Croatia. He and his family were visiting in England when the Yugoslav National Army began maneuvers in Slovenia, and war loomed on the horizon.

Torn between personal safety and a desire to return to a troubled homeland, Peterlin reread theologian

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose convictions led him to relinquish the safety of the United States for thwarting Nazi anti-Semitism in his native Germany.

Likewise, Peterlin returned to Zagreb, where he wanted to make a difference for his people and country. That's when he decided to create an information network, fostering cooperation between various groups providing relief.

Begun primarily as a news source, CIS has grown into an organization that stimulates ecumenical dialogue, relief efforts and peace initiatives.

As a reporter, Peterlin said he has witnessed the violation of every conceivable human right. While the situation is not beyond redemption, Peterlin said, "the fire-fighter approach of the U.N." is insufficient.

Sending emergency aid and troops for clean up will not solve the region's or the world's problems, he said. If efforts to date are the best the world can do, then "we are all in trouble," he said, adding that "without an ethical basis in politics, we are facing serious, serious problems, especially in the future.

"I think the crucial questions that should be raised are: What is right and wrong? What is just and unjust?"

The response to those questions should formulate the policy-making of the international community, he said.

Peterlin acknowledges that the Croatian situation is grim. But lacking an alternative, he clings to hope.

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Resolution urges Reno to enforce new law

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Recent shootings at or near abortion clinics have prompted a Senate resolution aimed at stepping up protection of doctors and patients at health clinics under a new federal law.

Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., introduced a resolution Jan. 6 urging the U.S. attorney general to enforce fully the federal law that protects access to health clinics for patients and workers.

The law was enacted after the murder of physician David Gunn outside a Pensacola, Fla., women's health clinic in March 1993. Since then, four other people have been slain by radical anti-abortion advocates, including two clinic workers killed recently in Massachusetts.

Boxer's resolution, which has bipartisan support, urges the justice department to "fully enforce the law and take any further necessary measures to protect persons ... from violent attack."

More than 130 incidents of violence or harassment directed at clinics were reported nationwide in 1994, Boxer said.

Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, D-Mass., called the murders in his home state "despicable acts of terrorism. This kind of vicious, hateful assault against women and health-care providers cannot be tolerated in any community in America."

The resolution (S.Res. 31) has been referred to the Senate Judiciary Committee to determine if it will come to the floor for a vote.

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-- By Pam Parry

Florida church loses homeless shelter appeal

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A Florida congregation has lost its attempt to challenge a zoning ordinance that forced it to close a shelter for the homeless.

Without comment, the U.S. Supreme Court on Jan. 9 let stand a ruling of the 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals that upheld zoning ordinances enacted by Collier County.

After it was forced to close a shelter that did not conform to the county requirements, First Assembly of God of Naples, Fla., filed suit contending that the zoning laws violate the First Amendment's guarantee of the free exercise of religion. Sheltering the homeless, the church argued, is an essential aspect of the Christian religion.

In siding with the county, the lower court said the zoning regulations were neutral and applied to all group homes, not just those operated by churches.

A federal appeals court said the county had not prohibited shelters but had defined where and how they may operate.

The intent of the ordinance was not to inhibit religion but to address health and safety concerns, the appeals court said.

In an order rejecting the church's petition for rehearing, the appeals court noted that the Religious Freedom Restoration Act "may apply to this case," but declined to discuss it since it was not raised by either party in the lawsuit.

The 1993 religious freedom act requires government to show a compelling reason to restrict religious practice, even through neutral, generally applicable laws.

Among options suggested by the church in asking the Supreme Court to review the case, was a request to return the case to the trial court to determine whether the zoning laws violate the Religious Freedom Restoration Act.

In another church-state dispute, the high court declined to hear a Pennsylvania man's claim that a state court improperly intervened in a dispute involving leadership in the Rosicrucian society, a movement named after a 15th century founder devoted to esoteric wisdom with emphasis on psychic and spiritual enlightenment.

Pennsylvania's top court said the society is in part religious in nature. The court noted that while courts may not resolve ecclesiastical conflicts, the trial court appropriately applied neutral principles of law in this dispute.

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-- By Larry Chesser

EDITORS' NOTE: The following story, originally issued Jan. 6, has been updated to include additional information from Charles Wilson of the Sunday School Board. The additional material appears in the 9th, 29th, 30th, and 31st paragraphs of this story.

Author pulls Joshua commentary over disputes with BSSB editors

By Bob Allen

BELTON, Texas (ABP) -- The author of a commentary on the Book of Joshua has withdrawn his upcoming volume in the New American Commentary series because of disputes with editors at the Baptist Sunday School Board.

The author, Stephen Wyrick, said he made the decision after recent discussions with editors in which "it became clear they weren't going to be happy" with the book. "The methodologies I desired to employ during the research and writing and the methodologies they desire to be employed are irreconcilable," said Wyrick, a religion professor at the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor in Belton, Texas.

Among concerns raised by editors are his dating of the events described in Joshua and his treatment of disputed texts, he said.

The 40-volume commentary set, authorized by Baptist Sunday School Board trustees in 1987, is designed to espouse an inerrantist view of Scripture. The Nashville, Tenn.-based Sunday School Board's last major commentary, the Broadman Bible Commentary, was published in the 1970s and is sometimes criticized as too liberal for the tastes of fundamental-conservative trustees who now hold sway at the board and other agencies of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Wyrick, then a professor at California Baptist College, passed muster as one of 45 original authors contracted to write volumes for the commentary series. However, as editors have changed over the last eight years, restrictions have been added "to where the present editorial staff is not comfortable with my approach," Wyrick said.

The original general editor, Michael Smith, resigned in 1990 to become a pastor. He was replaced by David Dockery, who stepped aside two years later when he accepted a deanship at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. In 1992, trustees elected Criswell College's Ray Clendenen the new general editor, causing one consulting editor to resign in protest.

Clendenen declined to be interviewed about Wyrick's commentary, referring a request for a statement to Charles Wilson, head of the Sunday School Board's trade and retail marketing divisions.

Wilson said, "By mutual agreement with Mr. Wyrick, we're not going to go forward with publication." He declined to answer questions about the decision, saying any further comment would be inappropriate.

However, in a story released four days later by Baptist Press, Wilson said the manuscript did not meet standards established for the 40-volume NAC by BSSB trustees in 1987, including consistency with "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy."

The withdrawal of Wyrick's volume, scheduled for release in 1995, follows at least two other recent publishing disputes at the Sunday School Board.

In November, the Board withdrew a book on biblical hermeneutics (methods of interpretation) written by Charles Scalise, formerly a faculty member at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, citing unspecified doctrinal problems in the completed manuscript.

In October, a letter from the board's discipleship and family adult department informed Baptist state convention leaders that a book titled "Celebrating Sex in Your Marriage," written by Texas marriage counselors Dan and Sandra McGee, was withdrawn because of lower-than-expected sales and "criticism beyond what we expected."

Some observers say the recent disputes with writers indicate the board is moving away from a traditional commitment to mainstream conservative scholarship to cater to a more fundamentalist approach.

Board officials, however, dispute that, pointing out that while such rejections are rare, they are not unprecedented.

"There have been no changes in our philosophy," Wilson told Associated Baptist Press. "'The Baptist Faith and Message' continues to be our guiding doctrinal statement, as it was a long time before I got here."

Wyrick said he ran into problems with Clendenen and other commentary editors over the dating of Israel's conquest of Palestine and issues raised by recent textual studies and archeological finds.

Wyrick said he believes the conquest took place in the 13th century before Christ, a dating accepted by most scholars and "pretty much what I have encountered during the years" while an undergraduate student at Dallas Baptist University and a master's and a doctoral student at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Sunday School Board editors, however, relying on a literal reading of a verse in First Kings, insist on a 15th century dating, he said.

First Kings 6:1 reports the exodus came 480 years before the construction of Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem, which most scholars place in the early 10th century. A literal interpretation, therefore, pushes the date for Joshua's escapades into the 15th century.

But many scholars do not interpret the number literally. "There are other texts in the Bible that seem to indicate other possible dates," Wyrick said. Chronicles dates the exodus 12 generations before the temple. "Many conservative scholars would argue that the 480 years in I Kings 6:1 is a reference to 12 generations, and generations were oftentimes reckoned as 40 years in the Old Testament. ... It's a matter of interpretation what you do with 1 Kings 6:1," he said.

Wyrick said he also places the writing of the Book of Joshua later than the Sunday School Board editors. "I placed the dating in the period of the monarchy. Some want to place it in the period of the judges," he said.

Wyrick did much of the research for the commentary during a recent sabbatical at the Albright Institute of Archeology in Jerusalem. Clendenen, he said, has stated he does not want much attention given to archeology.

"For me a commentary on Joshua needs to include clear and open discussion of the tension that exists between the archeological data and the various biblical interpretations of that data," Wyrick said.

Wyrick said he also examined discrepancies between the Hebrew Bible and other ancient texts, a practice "that's common in all academic commentaries," while editors wanted him to rely solely on the Hebrew text.

"Current interpretations and archeological data are not always in agreement with traditional interpretations of the texts," Wyrick said. "I think you have to discuss that tension that exists there. Sometimes it's resolved. Sometimes it's unresolved."

Wyrick said he discussed his views with previous editors and they posed no problem.

"My understanding when we started the project is we would be free to discuss the critical issues related to the text, and in the case of Joshua to discuss the critical issues related to the archeological interpretations," Wyrick said.

"Over the years as we've seen the change in the editors, it's become more and more obvious that my desired method of approach to the commentary and what they're looking for I can't be happy with and I'm sure they're not happy with. I don't want to publish anything that compromises my convictions," said Wyrick.

But the Sunday School Board's Wilson said Wyrick's manuscript is inconsistent with "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy," which implies an internal consistency within Scripture.

"Passages in Joshua are capable of more than one interpretation," Wilson told Baptist Press, "some of which can result in the appearance of inconsistency within that book. Dr. Wyrick's manuscript acknowledged some of those kinds of interpretations without ever resolving the inconsistencies."

Wilson said Wyrick's volume also was not written for the agreed-upon target audience. "The New

American Commentary is designed for use by persons who do not necessarily know the original languages," he said." This manuscript was written for an audience that knows Greek and Hebrew, a factor which would have required substantial rewriting rather than routine editing."

Sunday School Board trustees voted to publish the New American Commentary in 1987, overriding a committee recommendation that discouraged the venture by citing low market demand and fear of controversy. The trustees specified that the commentary must defend traditional authorship of biblical books and that all writers "hold to the position of inerrancy."

Wyrick said his commitment to inerrancy was never questioned in his disagreements with editors. "That's never been an issue," Wyrick said. "The question of my view of the authority of Scripture has never been in any question in the discussions that we've had."

But he does believe new findings can challenge traditional interpretations of the Bible. "Archeology neither proves nor disproves the Bible," Wyrick said. "It sheds light on the biblical text."

"Also I do not believe anyone's interpretation of Scripture is inerrant. Interpretation and the text are two separate issues."

"As you look at the biblical text, you may need to modify your interpretation to that text in light of recent textual studies (and) recent archeological discoveries. And as long as you don't make your interpretation infallible, then you can learn."

Wyrick said he never submitted a full manuscript, but initiated discussions about concerns with his editors based on extensive notes. Under his agreement with the publishers, his notes will be returned and he is free to submit the book to another publisher, he said.

"Folks have been very gracious at Broadman," said Wyrick. "They have been very kind. There is just a difference in opinion over how one should approach presenting the data."

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CORRECTION: In the Jan. 5 story "Ruschlikon seminary sells Swiss property for \$20 million," please change the fifth paragraph to read: "The property, which includes 5 acres and 6 buildings, ..."

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