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Editor: Greg Warner  
Associate Editor: Bob Allen  
Phone: (904) 262-6626  
Fax: (904) 262-7745

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## **Clinton calls nation to posture of civility**

By Pam Parry

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- American public life needs more reconciliation, civility and humility, said President Bill Clinton.

In an information age, the destructive language wielded in public discourse carries a more potent force and burden, he said. "We live in an age where anybody can say anything; and unlike in previous times, it gets into print."

Clinton, speaking Feb. 2 with eight religion reporters in the Oval Office, said that politicians should refrain from using negative language for political expediency. "I don't think anybody in public life, including me, is blameless."

Genuine differences over issues can be aired with a spirit of civility, he said.

Clinton, drawing from a theme in his recent State of the Union Address, challenged citizens and especially religious leaders to help America deal with many of its social ills.

"I've been trying to find ways to galvanize the energies of people of faith to work together on a common agenda that nearly all Americans would agree on; and at the same time, to try to respect the differences of opinion and views."

For example, he said the administration strongly supported the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, a law that restored a high level of protection for religious practice. Groups from across the political and theological spectrum have supported the legislation, signed into law November 1993.

One reporter asked Clinton if investigations into his personal conduct is "interfering with your ability to lead" the moral crusade outlined in his State of the Union Address.

"Not in my own mind," Clinton said. "That's up for other people to determine."

He pointed to comments he made at the National Prayer Breakfast, held earlier that day, saying, "There is an inordinate premium put on the use of words to destroy or to distract people. ... You can't always disprove every assertion, so insofar as whatever happened, I can't change yesterday, I can only change today and

tomorrow."

Clinton added that some social issues are so vital that he has to address them even if it fosters more criticism.

Another reporter asked Clinton if his welfare reform proposal and the GOP Contract With America take such Draconian measures against unwed mothers that they will drive up the abortion rate?

Clinton said his position would give more flexibility to the states without punishing the children whose parents are on welfare. Under his plan, a teen mother must stay in school and live in a supervised setting to receive assistance. After a limited period, the mother has to go to work if there is an available job, he said, adding that turning down a job could jeopardize the benefits.

Under other proposals, he said, the mother would be cut off after two years whether or not there is a job.

"I'll leave it to you to conclude what impact that might have on the abortion rate -- I don't know. But I don't believe ours would. I think ours is responsible.

"You have to have more requirements on people, you can't just continue to perpetuate the present system. But I don't think you should punish the children or punish people for their past mistakes. You should deal with their present conduct."

Responding to another question, Clinton said churches should do more for foster children and various other tough social situations.

"But I don't think you can say from that that there's no national interest which should command some taxpayer support to make sure that these children have minimal levels of nutrition and medical care and just the basic things that it seems to me we've got an interest in doing, because we don't want to lose any more of these kids."

But it will be tough for churches to do more with less government support, he said, adding America is not a particularly generous country in terms of social welfare.

"I don't think the American people object to spending tax money on poor people. I think what they object to is spending tax money on a system that perpetuates destructive conduct and irresponsible conduct."

Clinton said most Americans would not favor reducing spending for poor children to finance a capital-gains tax cut. But they would rather not waste money on a program that perpetuates dependency.

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## **Clinton to focus on job, not religious critics**

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- President Bill Clinton said he will focus on doing his job as president rather than responding to the persistent criticism leveled by religious conservatives during his term.

In a Feb. 2 Oval Office interview with religion writers, the president said it would take away from his ability to serve as president "if I have to spend all my time trying to answer charges about what people say that I did years ago."

Clinton is an active Southern Baptist whose views on social issues such as abortion and homosexual rights frequently have been criticized by SBC leaders and other religious conservatives. In addition, accusations about his personal conduct have been raised by religious commentators and other critics.

Asked about the barrage of criticism, the president underscored the difference between reputation and

character.

"I have increasingly less control over my reputation," he said, "but still full control over my character. That's between me and God."

Clinton lamented the fact that "we live in an age where anybody can say anything, and unlike in previous times, it gets into print. And even if they admit they took money to say it -- which is what happened in my case a couple of times -- it still gets wide currency."

While he intends to focus on his job and the future, Clinton told a group of Baptist editors in October he had been surprised that more religious leaders had not answered some of the harsh personal attacks coming from religious circles.

Since then, several Baptist leaders have registered objections to the treatment Clinton has received from religious conservatives.

Recently American Baptist evangelist and professor Tony Campolo demanded time on television preacher Jerry Falwell's "Old Time Gospel Hour" to answer allegations about Clinton's personal and political life contained in videos promoted and sold by Falwell.

Falwell has acknowledged that he has no evidence to support the accusations in the videos but he denied Campolo equal time.

In a news release, Campolo said Christians should not spread rumors they cannot prove are true. "It becomes essential that we as evangelicals hold each other accountable for what we say and do," Campolo said.

Earlier Clinton's pastor, Rex Horne of Immanuel Baptist Church in Little Rock, Ark., disturbed by Falwell's promotion of the videos, declined to let Falwell speak in his pulpit after the Lynchburg, Va., preacher was invited to address a pastor's gathering scheduled at Immanuel. The event was moved to another church.

And in a recent speech to a Jewish organization, Baptist Joint Committee Executive Director James M. Dunn said Clinton has been the "target of a well-orchestrated demonization campaign."

The president told reporters faith has been important in facing the criticism he has dealt with in office. Clinton, who said he recently read a number of Psalms and a book on Psalms by new Senate Chaplain Lloyd John Ogilvie, said he needs the power of God.

"I think the important thing -- I find this in the Scriptures over and over again -- the important thing that I have to keep focusing on is what am I going to do today, what am I going to do tomorrow, how can I be free to call on the power to God to make the most of this job that I have for a little bit of time in the grand sweep of things."

Asked about critics who question the sincerity of his faith or charge that he uses religion for political purposes, the president responded: "I think the truth is that there are people who don't believe it's genuine because they disagree with me politically."

The president said that while he has encouraged people of all faiths, "including people who disagree with me," to be activist citizens, religion and politics should not be merged.

"I don't think they should be bound together," he said. "I think the First Amendment is a good thing for our country, that we protect the right of everybody to be faithful to whatever they believe by not uniting church and state."

While openly religious, Clinton said he has not attempted to use religion for political purposes.

"I've never tried to say that there was a Christian coalition behind anything I did," or that "God had ordained us to do these following things and I knew it and anybody that didn't was seized by the devil."

Asked about the Christian Coalition's endorsement of the Republicans' Contract With America, the president said, "I think everybody knows that they basically are an arm of the Republican Party and that they're going to take all these positions."

He predicted the Pat Robertson-founded coalition, which reportedly plans to spend \$1 million to support

the GOP contract, "will come to be seen more and more like a political party with an agenda," rather than people driven into politics based on biblical views.

The president noted that a number of European political parties include the word "Christian" in their name and have religious roots, but "no one anymore seriously believes that every position they take is rooted in their reading of Scripture.

"And I think that the Christian Coalition is long since at that point."

Clinton said the coalition's credibility is more damaged by deceptive campaign tactics, such as distributing misleading voter guides in churches.

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## **Hemphill, students upbeat after probation announcement**

By Toby Druin and Greg Warner

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- "Your seminary education will go unhindered," President Ken Hemphill promised students at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary during chapel Feb. 3, one day after he announced the 3,117-student school had been placed on probation by its primary accrediting agency.

The Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada voted in January to place the Fort Worth, Texas, school on probation for two years because of trustee actions related to the firing of former president Russell Dilday last March.

ATS said probation was justified because the trustees failed to follow school policies in the evaluation of Dilday and the election and promotion of faculty, failed to consider all the school's constituents in their actions, and failed to preserve the school's integrity and academic freedom from inappropriate interference.

Hemphill conceded the school's troubles have left some students "a little paralyzed" about the future. But he noted ATS probation does not remove the school's accreditation. Southwestern has two years to correct the violations cited by the agency before more drastic action can be considered.

"This can only be a positive for you as students," Hemphill said, "because this means it gives us the opportunity to continue to refine and improve theological education here, and that is part of what ATS is about - - to make sure the communication continues, that you have academic freedom and a positive atmosphere to learn."

"One thing I am praying for in this experience is to see what God does for good in a circumstance that we may view as less than good," he said. "That experience may be as important as anything you learn in the classroom."

Some students who attended the chapel service took a similar positive approach.

"All the students I have talked to are upbeat, hopeful," said Victor Letbetter of Fort Worth. "They don't feel like this is a bad thing necessarily at all. It is a chance for us to grow."

"I see it as a chance for the school and the leadership to say, 'We will use what has happened to us and grow from it' -- just as the president has spoken today -- to see how we can take adversity and use it for good," echoed Chad Harris of Sherman, Texas.

Scotty Gray, Southwestern's executive vice president, said the low-key reaction to the probation announcement was not unexpected.

"I haven't talked to many faculty and students, but I don't detect any surprise or undue concern," he said. "It was expected by many and I think accepted in a positive way by those I have talked with. But I haven't talked with a great many."

Neither Hemphill nor the others commented on the role of trustees in probation. The trustees themselves declined comment. "Under ATS guidelines, any public comments must come from the seminary campus and Dr. Hemphill," said trustee chairman Ralph Pulley of Dallas.

"That really doesn't surprise me," student Kim Snyder said about the trustee silence. "They are trying to put a positive spin on it, trying to avoid some of the negative publicity we got last March."

But Snyder, who participated in student meetings with ATS, said the agency is most concerned about the actions and response of trustees.

"This [probation] is not an issue for students or faculty or staff," said Snyder, from Arlington, Texas. "It is an issue for the trustees. The question is: Are the trustees going to take probation seriously and change their attitudes and actions?"

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ADDITION: In the Feb. 2 story "Trustee actions at Southwestern bring probation from accreditor," please replace the 15th paragraph with the following:

Seminary officials said trustee leaders would not comment on the ATS decision. "Under ATS guidelines, any public comments must come from the seminary campus and Dr. Hemphill," added trustee chairman Ralph Pulley, a Dallas attorney.

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