

Associated Baptist Press

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

March 10, 1995

In this issue:

- Southwestern Seminary drops appeal of probation
- Baptist-Jewish statement raises questions about dialogue
- Federal judge upholds religious freedom law

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

Southwestern Seminary drops appeal of probation

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary has dropped its appeal of the probation imposed by the Association of Theological Schools.

"Our decision was based largely on our desire to move positively toward the future rather than to dwell in the past," President Ken Hemphill said March 10, one year and a day after trustees fired seminary president Russell Dilday.

"A lengthy appeal process would consume energy and resources that could best be spent on the building of the seminary for the glory of God," Hemphill said.

ATS, the seminary's lead accrediting agency, placed Southwestern on a two-year probation in January, citing violations of procedures by the school's trustees when they fired Dilday March 9, 1994, as well as continuing concerns about academic freedom at the Fort Worth, Texas, school.

Hemphill, who was elected to succeed Dilday last July, emphasized that "the decision not to appeal does not mean that we agree with the decision of ATS to place Southwestern on probation, but it does mean that we are united in our conviction that we can work quickly and constructively through probation."

As to the seminary's change of heart, Hemphill said, "We originally registered our right to appeal before the deadline so that all options remained open to Southwestern." He noted that the recent decision not to continue with the appeal was reached "after consultation and prayer with trustees, faculty, and administration."

Members of Southwestern's theology faculty passed a resolution Feb. 14 complaining that they were not consulted about the decision to appeal. Hemphill later told them no final decision had been made and he was inclined not to pursue the appeal, according to faculty members. Meeting with the seminary's full faculty March 6, Hemphill again implied Southwestern will drop the appeal.

Until recently trustees had denied comment on the probation. Breaking that silence March 10, trustee chairman Ralph Pulley of Dallas said: "While we are not in accord with the ATS conclusions, we are sensitive to the observations of ATS. Those observations have been and are being addressed by the trustees, the president and others in the seminary family. We expect an early, positive resolution of the ATS action, and have determined to

devote our energies in this direction."

Meanwhile, Southwestern's faculty endorsed a proposal to form a committee to monitor compliance with one crucial condition of the ATS probation: that academic freedom be assured and that trustees establish "a stable institutional environment."

The committee, as proposed by the faculty March 6, would consist of faculty, trustee and student representatives. Scotty Gray, Southwestern's executive vice president, confirmed the committee is under consideration. "We have discussed this in a preliminary way with board and faculty," he said.

The 3,200-student seminary, the largest of the six seminaries owned by the Southern Baptist Convention, must correct problems noted in the probation or risk losing its accreditation.

Accreditation is seen as a seal of approval for educational institutions. It carries prestige and helps student enrollment and fund-raising efforts.

-30-

-- By Greg Warner

Statement on Baptist-Jewish relations raises questions about role of dialogue

By Bob Allen

(ABP) -- A recent statement on Jewish-Christian relations by the Alliance of Baptists raises classic questions about both the presuppositions and the aims of interfaith dialogue, say both detractors and defenders of the statement.

Adopted March 4 by the Alliance at its annual convocation, in Vienna, Va., the statement calls for "genuine dialogue" between Baptists and Jews and argues for the "efficacy of the Jewish faith." The statement was recited the following day in a program at the United States Holocaust Museum in Washington.

Bill Gordon, associate director of the interfaith witness department of the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board, said he affirmed the statement's call to dialogue but worried that the statement calls for Baptists to "compromise on the nature of the gospel."

"When the statement criticizes a theology which calls for 'conversion over dialogue' and argues for the 'efficacy of the Jewish faith,' it implies that Jews do not have to believe in Jesus for salvation," Gordon said.

An "uncompromising dialogue" can help Jewish people to understand that Baptist evangelism efforts "are motivated not by anti-Semitism but rather by the conviction that faith in Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation," Gordon said.

But other experts contend that while a dialogue approach does not necessarily exclude witnessing, Baptists need to rethink a theology of Judaism they contend is colored by 20 centuries of anti-Jewish interpretation of Christian Scripture.

"I don't know if reinterpretation is the same as compromise," said Chris Leighton, director of the Maryland Interfaith Project's Institute of Christian-Jewish Studies in Baltimore. Leighton, a Presbyterian minister, encourages Christians and Jews to seek dialogue opportunities at the congregational level.

David Yeager, a Maryland pastor who drafted the statement on Jewish-Christian relations approved by the Alliance after considerable revision by the organization's board of directors, said Baptists need a "re-evaluation" of theology regarding Jews and Judaism.

Baptists, Yeager argued, have for too long accepted uncritically negative stereotypes of Jews that made their way into the New Testament because they were written in a first-century context of conflict between Jews and Gentiles. That polemical attitude fueled and was perpetuated by an open hostility toward Judaism that has characterized much of the history of the Christian church, he said.

Yeager, pastor of College Parkway Baptist Church in Arnold, Md., is currently working on a doctorate at Baltimore Hebrew University. He previously completed a master's degree, where he studied the history of Baptist-Jewish relations.

In his master's thesis, Yeager noted that the Southern Baptist Convention gave little attention to relations to Jews before 1921, when the SBC Home Mission Board appointed its first national missionary to the Jews.

A major shift in Southern Baptist-Jewish relations occurred in 1966 with the establishment of what was later called the interfaith witness department. The department sought to relate to other faith groups through "dialogue" and to serve as "a catalyst and facilitator" by educating churches, associations and state conventions rather than through a "direct" witness to various faith groups, Yeager said.

For several years, Jewish dialogues played a prominent role in the interfaith witness department's work, said George Sheridan, who worked in the department 13 years. "Except for the Catholics, we were the only denomination that had so much of our employee time related to Christian-Jewish relations, I think," Sheridan said.

After the election of Larry Lewis as HMB president, Sheridan was removed from his post because of public statements that he did not believe modern Jews need a personal faith in Jesus to be saved. When he declined a demotion and transfer to the board's Atlanta offices, Sheridan was fired.

In a reorganization that took effect in 1989, the interfaith witness department was transferred from the HMB's missions section to the evangelism section, signifying, Yeager said, another change in philosophy that "once again emphasized the conversion of Jews over dialogue."

The last official Baptist-Jewish dialogue sponsored by the department was held in 1986, Yeager said.

In a letter to the editor of a Baptist state newspaper last year, the interfaith witness department's current director, Phil Roberts, said the department now does "most of our Jewish evangelism related to the Fellowship of Messianic Congregations of the SBC," an independent group formed in 1990 with which the HMB espouses a fraternal relationship.

Gus Elowitz of Houston, president of the Southern Baptist Messianic Fellowship, said he agrees with "99 percent" of the Alliance's statement.

"I was born Jewish and I'll die Jewish, but 17 years ago I trusted in Jesus, Yeshua, as my Lord and Jewish Messiah," he said.

But Elowitz said he "absolutely" disagrees with the statement's apparent reading of Matthew's Great Commission. "Education of Messiah Jesus' only plan for salvation for Gentiles and Jewish people must not be called anti-Semitic," he said.

"I believe that all Southern Baptists that do not individually and personally trust Christ are as lost as an atheist. That goes for all Baptists, Protestants, Catholics, Moslems, Buddhists, Hindus ... and yes, even my Jewish people," Elowitz said.

Elowitz said the Alliance appears to prefer "the enjoyment of a friendship" with "today's rabbis of Judaism" over agreement with "Yeshua, the Jewish Messiah."

Jim Sibley, a Southern Baptist representative to Israel who in recent years has unsuccessfully encouraged the Southern Baptist Convention to adopt a resolution on Jewish evangelism, offered the statement an equally harsh assessment.

"While the statement opposes anti-Semitism, it does not go far enough," Sibley said in a written response. "Those who would deny the Jewish people access to the gospel and contradict Jesus' claims espouse a form of anti-Semitism which, in the light of eternity, makes the horrors of Hitler's ovens pale into insignificance."

The background paragraph preceding the statement opposing a "theology of conversion" in effect opposes "the Great Commission," Sibley said. "It seems to me that the Christian mission is one piece of cloth that begins with our obligation to the Jewish people," he said. "If it begins to unravel there, the entire enterprise is undone."

The president of the Alliance of Baptists said it is "encouraging" that Elowitz "agrees with 99 percent" of the statement, that Gordon "affirms our concern for dialogue with those in the Jewish community" and that Sibley "wants to go further in opposing anti-Semitism."

"The theological questions raised indicate the need for dialogue on these issues among Baptists of good will in addition to dialogue between Jewish and Christians," said Alliance president John Roberts, pastor of Woodbrook Baptist Church in Baltimore, Md. "I would welcome such Baptist-to-Baptist dialogue."

Roberts disputed those who read the statement as being against evangelism. "Dialogue does not preclude witnessing to one's faith or the possibility of conversion," he said. "As a Christian I always hope to bear witness to all persons that Jesus is my Lord in a manner which honors him and respects those with whom I share my faith."

Alan Neely, a former missions professor at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary who now teaches at Princeton Theological Seminary in New Jersey, agreed that a dialogue approach need not exclude the possibility of witness. However, he added, the main purpose of dialogue is less to persuade than to learn about other faiths.

"A person who begins a dialogue assuming that the other person's faith is not legitimate, that it is not held with integrity, will never be able to engage in true religious dialogue, because there is no willingness to hear the other person, no willingness to learn from the other person and certainly no disposition to be convinced at any point that this person is speaking truth," Neely said.

Such an approach produces "confrontation, not dialogue," Neely said, and "ends more frequently in frustration than in friendship and respect."

Still, Neely said, it is appropriate once trust has been established in the dialogue process for the Christian to acknowledge the desire that the partner in dialogue "would become a disciple of Jesus Christ."

"On the one hand I would be critical of the 'conversion approach' to dialogue, because I think it begins with assumptions that would prevent true dialogue. On the other hand I would hope that a person who understands what it means to be Christ's disciple would not hide that conviction simply out of respect for the other person," Neely said.

Neely said it "would be a profound tragedy" if the Alliance's statement, intended to foster good will between Baptists and Jews, instead "further divided us as Christians."

Yeager dismissed criticism by Elowitz, Sibley and Gordon.

Contrary to Elowitz's interpretation of the statement, it "does not insinuate that sharing one's faith is necessarily anti-Semitic," Yeager said. However, he said, "one could certainly understand from a Jewish perspective how the elimination of the Jewish faith through conversion could be perceived as anti-Semitic."

The statement does not undermine, or even mention, the Great Commission, as Elowitz and Sibley charge, Yeager said.

He said Sibley "seems to hold a very fragile theology if a rethinking of any part of it destroys the whole of it" and that Gordon's fears about compromising the nature of the gospel are unfounded.

Yeager said the statement calls for Baptists "to deal honestly with our sacred text." In the book of Romans, Yeager said, the apostle Paul "deals with two seemingly contradictory realities: the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and God's irrevocable covenant with the Jewish people."

Paul, unable to reconcile the issue, "assigns this dilemma to the mystery of God," Yeager said. "We as Baptists would do well to occasionally confess our own lack of understanding and leave what we do not know to the mystery of God," he said.

Federal judge upholds religious freedom law

HONOLULU (ABP) -- A federal district judge has upheld the constitutionality of a 1993 law that restored a strict legal test for protecting religious practice.

District Judge Helen Gillmor rejected Hawaii's claim that Congress overstepped its authority when it enacted the Religious Freedom Restoration Act in 1993. Gillmor's ruling is the first decision to address the act's constitutionality.

Congress enacted RFRA's strict protection for religious practice after the U.S. Supreme Court virtually abandoned it in 1990. In ruling that religiously inspired use of peyote by Native Americans is not protected by the First Amendment, the high court said that "generally applicable, religion-neutral laws that have the effect of burdening a particular religious practice need not be justified by a compelling governmental interest."

The 1990 ruling reversed three decades of legal precedent that required government to show a compelling reason to restrict religion.

Hawaii officials challenged the 1993 act after a federal judge ruled that state prison officials must show, under RFRA, a compelling reason to infringe on a prisoner's religious practice.

Gerald Belgard, a Native American, charged that prison officials violated his right to practice Native American religious traditions by depriving him of the use of religious items such as a medicine bag and eagle feathers, by forcing him to cut his hair and by denying him access to a religious counselor.

In its effort to turn back Belgard's claims, Hawaii charged that Congress took over functions reserved for courts when it enacted RFRA. Gillmor disagreed, holding that Congress acted "within the bounds of its enforcement powers under the 14th Amendment when it enacted the RFRA."

A Baptist church-state attorney said Gillmor's ruling is significant because it is the first time a court has directly addressed RFRA's constitutionality.

"It's important to win the first one, because it becomes precedent for other courts to follow," said Brent Walker, general counsel at the Baptist Joint Committee.

Walker said challenges to RFRA are pending in other courts.

-30-

-- By Larry Chesser

END