

Associated Baptist Press

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SOUTHERN BAPTIST HISTORICAL
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Nashville, Tennessee

May 1, 1995

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Jackson won't teach at seminary, but evangelist, school differ on why

By Bob Allen and Greg Warner

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- Evangelist Richard Jackson says he backed out of an agreement to teach a short-term course at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary to protest actions by seminary President Albert Mohler.

Recent decisions to "terminate faculty members who will not adhere to a specified creed followed by the public reprimand of adult students who took action against such anti-Baptist decisions have stirred within me a personal conviction that simply will not allow me to fill the July 17-21 teaching position," Jackson wrote in an April 24 letter to David Dockery, vice president for academic administration at the seminary.

But seminary officials say Jackson was never invited to teach at the school in Louisville, Ky. Jackson was contacted about teaching a one-week course on "Evangelistic Preaching" at Boyce Bible School, a division of Southern Seminary, but was never offered a contract, Dockery was quoted as saying in a seminary news release dated April 28.

The news release said Jackson was not invited to teach "in part" because he refused to sign the Abstract of Principles, the seminary's founding document.

"I will never sign a contract or approve for instruction any person who refuses to sign the Abstract of Principles," Mohler said. Mohler said he also would not employ persons who have publicly supported the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship "or any other group opposed to the Southern Baptist Convention."

Jackson called the seminary's response ridiculous. If he wasn't invited to teach, Jackson asked, then why was he asked to sign the Abstract? "The last thing they said to me was, 'You don't have to sign it,'" Jackson insisted.

Meanwhile both the seminary and Jackson accused the other of leaking the letter to the press.

In the April 28 news release, Dockery said Jackson's letter "was apparently sent to the news media before I received it."

But Jackson denied sending the letter to the press. "I did not do anything publicly," Jackson insisted. "Somebody in (Jim) Woolums' or Dockery's office must have." Jackson said the letter was intended to be a private communication and its release was an "invasion of privacy."

The letter was sent unsolicited to Associated Baptist Press from an unidentified source.

Jackson said he was first contacted by Woolums, assistant dean at Boyce Bible School, two years ago about teaching the class on evangelism. A tentative date was set, he said.

A snag developed last October when Jackson was asked to sign the Abstract of Principles, the seminary's doctrinal statement, which all professors are asked to sign. "There wasn't anything in it I didn't believe," Jackson said, "but I wasn't going to sign a creed."

According to Jackson, Woolums suggested Jackson's class could be taught at Boyce but administered by Campbellsville College through a joint agreement between the two schools, eliminating the need to sign the document. "I said, 'I don't like that,'" Jackson recalled.

Woolums then suggested Jackson write Dockery saying he agreed with the Abstract while explaining his reluctance to sign, Jackson said. Before Jackson responded, a furor erupted on campus over the March 20 firing of Diana Garland as dean of Southern's Carver School of Social Work.

In the news release Dockery said "my first contact with Richard Jackson was his letter declining a non-existent invitation."

However, Jackson's office gave ABP a copy of a letter to Dockery dated March 28 describing Jackson's anticipation about teaching at Boyce. "Please be assured that I am already praying that the week will be filled with ideas, experiences, insights and inspiration that will be a blessing and a help to students and myself alike," Jackson wrote.

The March 28 letter also acknowledged that Jackson declined to sign both the Abstract of Principles and a newer document, the Covenant Renewal, citing "a strong personal conviction" against signing a confession of faith. "I believe that the consistency of the public record and audio/video documentation available of my 36 years of gospel proclamation will stand in lieu of any need for a creedal statement of my doctrinal position," he wrote.

An assistant to Jackson said the evangelist received no response from the March 28 letter to Dockery and assumed his explanation to Dockery was acceptable.

Dockery was unavailable for comment.

Woolums' supervisor, Boyce Dean Bob Johnson, agreed with Dockery that no formal teaching contract had been extended to Jackson. "There had been discussions, but nothing had been finalized," he said.

Johnson said Boyce administrators have the power to recommend but not appoint professors. The seminary's administration had not approved Jackson as a Boyce professor and his name did not appear on the summer teaching schedule, Johnson said.

Jackson said he was disturbed by Garland's firing and the recent addition of new criteria for hiring of faculty at Southern Seminary. What disturbed Jackson most, the evangelist said, was Mohler's treatment of students who objected to the firing.

He alluded to recent events involving the seminary's social work school. In interviewing a prospective faculty member in March, Mohler asked for the candidate's views on a short list of social issues, and then blocked the nomination because of the professor's view that women should be allowed to serve as pastors.

Afterward, Garland, the dean of the Carver School, reported to students that by adding hiring criteria in addition to formal written doctrinal guidelines, Mohler undermined the school's ability to hire qualified faculty. Mohler fired the dean for insubordination. She remains on the faculty in a tenured teaching position.

The firing unleashed a torrent of criticism, including a sit-in protest by some students. In an April 5 forum, Mohler advised students their proper role is not to seek to influence administration of the school. "Your responsibility as a student is to study," he said.

Seminary trustees met April 17-18 and backed the president, giving him more power in the faculty selection process and adopting a policy restricting faculty from using classrooms "for the purpose of undermining or obstructing the policies of this institution" or acting in ways "that are injurious or detrimental to the seminary's relationship with the denomination, donors or other constituencies within and without the seminary community."

Jackson said in his April 24 letter to Dockery he is "sincerely sorry for the inconvenience my cancellation might cause, but for the impression to be created that I am in any way aligned with those who insist that one Baptist can tell another Baptist what to believe would be to desecrate everything I have ever preached, taught or lived."

Jackson is former pastor of North Phoenix Baptist Church. He retired from the active pastorate in 1993 after 25 years at the Arizona church.

In the formative years of the inerrancy movement in the Southern Baptist Convention, Jackson was regarded a rising star in the conservative group. He broke ranks with the movement, however, and ran unsuccessfully for SBC president with moderate support in 1987 and 1988.

He now is president of the Richard Jackson Center for Evangelism and Encouragement at Howard Payne University in Brownwood, Texas.

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Vice president, department head resign at Southwestern Seminary

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- A top development officer and a teaching department chairman have announced they are leaving Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas.

Jay Chance, vice president for institutional advancement since 1990, said he begins a new job May 14 as vice president of the Lockman Foundation, an organization in La Habra, Calif., which translates and disseminates the Scriptures. He said he sees the job as an "exciting opportunity."

Darrel Baergen, director of the seminary's Center for Christian Communication Studies since 1981, said he will retire July 31. He will then become chairman of the department of communications at Hardin-Simmons University in Abilene, Texas.

Both men announced their resignations April 28, just prior to the May 1 inauguration of Ken Hemphill as president of the seminary. Hemphill succeeds Russell Dilday, who was fired by trustees in March 1994 who alleged he was sympathetic to moderates and blocked conservative reforms at the school.

The firing raised concerns about academic freedom, which led to the school being placed on probation by a national accrediting agency. It also made fund-raising more difficult, which was Chance's primary task.

Asked if he was leaving because of the Dilday firing, Chance said his statement "would not be that strong."

He said, however, it was "the circumstances of Southwestern over the last year" that led to the several "opportunities and options" he had considered. "We're quite excited about the one we've chosen," he said.

Baergen, meanwhile, said changes at the seminary -- including concerns about academic freedom and a loss of enthusiasm since Dilday's forced departure -- are partly responsible for his decision to leave.

"This last year has been a depressing year," Baergen told the Fort Worth Star-Telegram. He said he is grateful to have worked with talented students and staff members at Southwestern, but added: "I find little enthusiasm left for my work at Southwestern. I grieve with some of my colleagues about the series of events perpetuated by the struggle within the Southern Baptist Convention. It is time for me to leave.

"As I do, I leave friends and colleagues who would like to be able to serve Christ and students with academic freedom and spiritual preparation at Southwestern, but elsewhere, if necessary."

Hemphill said: "I'm sorry Dr. Baergen feels that way. We have nothing but admiration for him and what he has done for the seminary."

The two men are the latest faculty members to leave the 3,200-student seminary since Dilday was fired.

Bruce Corley, dean of theology, announced in April that he was leaving to accept a teaching position with

Baylor University's new Truett Theological Seminary. Dilday is interim dean of Truett, which is controlled by moderates.

Baergen predicted that Southwestern, one of six national seminaries operated by the conservative-controlled Southern Baptist Convention, will lose students and faculty to new moderate seminaries being opened in the South and Southwest.

"My guess is that we will see a gradual attrition of Southwestern faculty and students as regional theological schools become the norm, with Hardin-Simmons and Truett Seminary setting the pace," Baergen said.

But Hemphill said he is optimistic about the future of the school and believes that most other faculty share his view.

Tommy Lea, professor of New Testament at the seminary, said he believes that most of the faculty are committed to staying at Southwestern and helping it.

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-- By Jim Jones and Bob Allen

Baptist benevolence agency pondering purchase of Dallas church

DALLAS (ABP) -- Trustees of Buckner Baptist Benevolences are considering whether to buy Prestonwood Baptist Church in Dallas. The purchase would clear the way for the 13,000-member congregation to move to a new building north of the city.

Church members voted April 23 to relocate from the current north Dallas facility to a new site of more than 100 acres off the north Dallas Tollway in Plano. The church is reported to have the largest attendance of any church in the Dallas area. On Easter Sunday, 12,000 people attended services, officials said.

According to the Dallas Morning News, Jack Graham, Prestonwood's senior minister, told the congregation the price being negotiated with Buckner would be the largest ever paid for a church in the United States. It would be enough to retire the church's \$6.2 million debt on the current building, Graham said.

"The prospect of passing our church facilities on to Buckner is very satisfying," Graham said. "We are extremely grateful for the potential of the continued influence in this area through this fine Christian ministry."

Acquisition of the church facility in north Dallas would represent a major expansion for Buckner, a 116-year-old organization that offers ministries to senior adults, children and families. The agency has a 1,000-member staff and offers services to an estimated 10,000 clients in 17 Texas cities.

The new Buckner Family Care and Conference Center would include day care for senior citizens, counseling for low-income families and conferences for social-service providers. It would also house the administrative offices for the agency's statewide ministries.

None of Buckner's services in its east Dallas children's home and senior citizen housing facilities would be cut back, said Buckner President Kenneth Hall.

"We're not doing anything to abandon this east Dallas site because this is where our home is, our heritage, the 116-year-old beginning spot for us," Hall said.

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-- By ABP staff

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