

Associated Baptist Press

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

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SBC opposes Foster confirmation, calls for religious equality amendment

By Bob Allen

ATLANTA (ABP) -- The Southern Baptist Convention went on record June 21 opposing Henry Foster's confirmation as U.S. surgeon general and calling for a constitutional amendment to protect religious expression.

Messengers to the 1995 SBC, meeting in the Georgia Dome in Atlanta, adopted the resolution on the Foster nomination the same day the Senate planned a key three-hour debate on the confirmation and anticipated a possible filibuster threatened by Sen. Phil Gramm (R-Texas).

The resolution urged senators to oppose Foster for the nation's top health-care post and pledged support for "any filibuster which may be waged against the nomination." It urged President Bill Clinton to appoint for the post "a health professional who will advocate principles consistent with the Judeo-Christian ethic."

The resolution said Foster holds positions on controversial issues similar to those of his predecessor, Dr. Joycelyn Elders, who resigned from the post under pressure from conservative groups.

"There is little or no difference between Joycelyn Elders and the current nominee," Drew Hayes, pastor of First Baptist Church in Shelbyville, Tenn., told messengers.

The statement opposes Foster's pro-choice position on abortion, his advocacy of "safe-sex" pregnancy prevention and his support for the sterilization of mentally impaired women in the 1970s.

It acknowledges Foster's "impressive academic and professional credentials," but says Foster's "credibility has come into question" because of confusion over the number of abortions he has performed and his record of support for Planned Parenthood.

Two messengers spoke against the resolution, which passed overwhelmingly. Jay Robison, pastor of Central Baptist Church in Paris, Ky., said the resolution "could be perceived as racist" because Foster is an African American. Jeff Lowe, pastor of Druid Hills Baptist Church in Atlanta, argued the statement violated the separation

of church and state by "entering into the realm of politics."

Later, the SBC's second vice president responded to those charges. "There's a clear distinction between racial issues and moral issues," Gary Frost, an African American, told reporters.

"Abortion is an abomination before God," added Frost, pastor of Rising Sun Baptist Church in Youngstown, Ohio. "What we have here is where politics has entered into the realm of morality."

Richard Land, head of the SBC's moral-concerns agency, the Christian Life Commission, said it would be improper for the convention to oppose a political candidate, but Foster is a nominee, which is "very different from a candidate."

In an election, Land explained, citizens have the opportunity to influence decisions directly by voting. In the confirmation of a political appointee, the only influence voters have is to appeal to elected officials, he added.

"This is a public policy and morality issue, not a political issue," Land said. "Dr. Foster is unacceptable to the vast majority of Southern Baptists based on his views."

Land, Frost and SBC president Jim Henry opposed Foster's confirmation at a news conference in February. The Christian Life Commission later adopted a statement similar to the SBC resolution protesting the Foster nomination.

Another resolution adopted by messengers called on Congress to adopt a constitutional amendment to protect religious exercises, including voluntary prayer and religious speech by students in public schools.

The resolution cited "confusing and contradictory rulings" by the U.S. Supreme Court on religious freedom questions, requiring that religious speech "be treated discriminatorily in the name of strict separation of church and state."

It calls for a constitutional amendment to overturn those rulings, while preventing the government from "composing, compelling or subsidizing prayer or religious expression by any person."

Other resolutions protested religious persecution around the world and opposed the patenting of animal and human genes. Another resolution expressing appreciation for the American Baptist Theological Seminary, an African American school in Nashville, Tenn., is scheduled for consideration on Thursday.

A massive SBC reorganization approved earlier in the meeting will eliminate a commission established in 1913 to provide support for theological education of black Baptists. The SBC restructuring proposal said that since denominational schools are now integrated, the formal relationship is no longer needed.

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Implementation of reorganization will take years, leaders say

By Mark Wingfield

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Although the Southern Baptist Convention has adopted the most massive reorganization in its 150-year history, rearranging the denominational building blocks will take up to five years.

Messengers to this year's SBC annual meeting laid the foundation June 20 by approving the restructuring report, called "Covenant for a New Century." The blueprints, spelled out in the "Covenant" document, were drawn by a seven-member Program and Structure Study Committee.

Now the SBC Executive Committee will take on the role of general contractor to determine how the reconstruction will proceed. During the next year, the Executive Committee is charged with developing a "transition plan" to present to messengers at next year's convention in New Orleans.

In a news conference soon after adoption of the restructuring plan, members of the Program and Structure Study Committee deferred most questions about the timeline of changes to the Executive Committee.

"It's in the Executive Committee's purview," chairman Mark Brister said in answer to one such question.

The one issue already scheduled to come back to the SBC for approval is an amendment to Bylaw 15, which lists the names of the SBC's agencies. Bylaw changes require approval at two subsequent conventions. The change to Bylaw 15 was approved for the first time this year.

However, the Executive Committee apparently will not have to wait on the second approval of Bylaw 15 changes to begin implementing the reorganization. James Guenther, a Nashville attorney and legal counsel to the SBC, has said the convention's positive vote on the "Covenant for a New Century" report is sufficient action to adopt the restructuring plan. The second vote on the bylaw change appears to be a technicality.

Some aspects of the reconstruction will be easier to implement than others. For example, changing the name of the Foreign Mission Board to International Mission Board is mainly a matter of filing legal papers and reprinting letterhead.

The process of dissolving five agencies entirely will be more complicated. But perhaps the most complex action will be merging the Home Mission Board, Brotherhood Commission and Radio and Television Commission into the new North American Mission Board.

The first step will be to create a new trustee board for the North American Mission Board. This 75-member board is to be comprised initially of some trustees who have served the three existing agencies.

Restructuring committee members have said the first responsibility of this new trustee board will be to hire a chief executive and then vice presidents for each of the board's three major divisions.

In the news conference June 20, restructuring committee members were asked whether the current presidents of the Home Mission Board, Brotherhood Commission and Radio and Television Commission would have jobs in the new structure. That decision will be made by the new trustee board, the committee answered, indicating neither Larry Lewis, James Williams nor Jack Johnson has any guarantee of continued employment.

While convention observers have predicted an overall staff downsizing as the three agencies merge, the restructuring committee declined to predict how many jobs might be eliminated.

According to the "Covenant" document, all aspects of the restructuring are to be in place by the year 2000.

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Mohler calls SBC to remember 'God's hand' in its history

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Like the ancient Israelites who credited God for bringing them to the Promised Land, Southern Baptists should look on their 150-year history and proclaim "God did this," said Albert Mohler.

"The fact that the Southern Baptist Convention exists 150 years after its founding, much less the fact that it has been so remarkably blessed, is a testimony to God's faithfulness and his goodness to us," Mohler said.

Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, preached the annual convention sermon during the June 20-22 SBC meeting, during which Southern Baptists celebrated their sesquicentennial.

Like the Israelites, who erected 12 stones to memorialize their crossing the Jordan River into the Promised Land, Southern Baptists are called to remember from where they have come, said Mohler. He suggested "five stones," or imperatives, that should shape Southern Baptists' memory and commitment.

Mohler said Southern Baptists must:

-- Renew their passion for God.

"We are not much marked by passion," Mohler noted. "In the midst of our building and leading, our coming and going, and the frantic pace of our over-scheduled lives, we have seen our passion dissipate in our busy-ness.

"This happens to denominations as well. Passion can be lost in programs and progress reports and calendars. In doing what is good we may fail to do that which is best"

-- Reclaim their theological heritage.

Southern Baptists are "at their best" when they stand firm on the truth of God, Mohler said. "And yet we live in an age which denigrates, rejects and compromises God's revealed truth. ... We see in our own midst the development of denominational amnesia which will quickly issue into theological compromise and doctrinal declension."

"When a denomination begins to consider doctrine divisive, theology troublesome, and conviction inconvenient, consider that denomination on its way to a well-deserved death," he warned.

The tendency of denominations, like other human creations, is to drift away from truth, Mohler said. Southern Baptists, therefore, should pray for "a recovery of conviction and confession," he said.

-- Recover their zeal for the gospel.

The belief in salvation only through Jesus "is among the most compromised truths in the contemporary church," Mohler charged. Those who hold that belief are called intolerant, insensitive and imperialistic, he said.

Yet such a commitment characterized Southern Baptists from the beginning and accounts for their remarkable success, Mohler said. Contemporary Baptists, he said, must hold fast to the one clear purpose of the SBC's founders: to spread the gospel.

-- Recognize their times and task.

The world has changed dramatically since the SBC was founded in 1845, Mohler said.

"We live in a thoroughly secularized culture which is crumbling at the foundations," he said. "The great fixed truths of the Christian worldview have been displaced and rejected by rampant relativism, subjectivism, secularism and even paganism ... We are living on the brink of what may be a new dark age."

The 20th century has produced a "death culture" characterized by the Nazi extermination camps, rampant street violence, abortion and assisted suicide, Mohler said. "A society which would abort tens of millions of unborn infants while celebrating its growing prosperity is a culture set for divine judgment."

-- Refocus their mission and mandate.

Mohler, who served on the committee that designed a simplified, smaller structure for the SBC -- approved by the convention a day earlier -- said the new SBC properly focuses on the work of churches.

"The Southern Baptist Convention is a means, and not an end in itself. ... The Southern Baptist Convention has no mission but the Great Commission ministries of Southern Baptist churches."

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-- By Greg Warner

Seminary president defends Calvinist convictions at SBC

By Mark Wingfield

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Southern Baptist Theological Seminary's Abstract of Principles, which has been interpreted as a Calvinist document by President Albert Mohler, contains truth that all Southern Baptists can agree on, Mohler said June 20.

Mohler, who affirms a theology known as five-point Calvinism, spoke about his commitment to theological truth several times during the annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention in Atlanta June 20-22.

Mohler spoke about his belief in Reformed theology, or Calvinism, in a breakfast meeting of the Southern Baptist Founders Conference June 20. He also made reference to his theological convictions while delivering the convention's annual sermon June 21. Earlier that day, during Southern Seminary's report to the convention, two messengers spoke from the floor about Mohler's theological positions.

Calvinism is a theological system based largely on the teachings of the 17th-century theologian John Calvin.

In full form it asserts five points: total depravity of humans, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace and perseverance of the saints.

Together, these doctrines assert that God has preordained, or elected, only certain people to salvation and thereby also has preordained some to damnation.

Mohler has declared his beliefs are in line with those held by the founders of Southern Seminary and the founders of the SBC. The theme of his two years at Southern Seminary's helm has been returning the school to its theological roots.

This effort has drawn praise from some quarters, condemnation from others and befuddlement from others. Several officers of the seminary's alumni association resigned their posts June 21, citing Mohler's belief in Calvinism as one reason for their action.

However, Mohler told the Founders Conference breakfast the seminary's trustees support him and intend to "continue the course and will see it through."

Mohler said his leadership is based on the Abstract of Principles, the seminary's doctrinal statement: "I am devoted to biblical truth, and the Abstract of Principles contain(s) and describe(s) biblical truth that all Southern Baptists can agree on and at one time did."

In his speech to the Founders Conference, Mohler implied that those who object to his theological leadership at the seminary do not understand the complete truth of the Bible.

"The turning point of what is happening at Southern Seminary came out just a few months ago, and when Southern Baptists finally get the word of that, they will accept biblical truth," he declared.

Mohler cited recent comments by Frank Stagg, a former professor at Southern. Stagg "finally told people what many of us knew all along," Mohler said. "When the founding fathers of Southern wrote the Abstract of Principles, there were no arguments about it because everybody believed what was in the Abstract of Principles because the Abstract of Principles is biblical truth.

"Dr. Stagg said that those who are complaining about the controversy at Southern are not debating the interpretation of the Abstract of Principles but now are saying that they believe it to be wrong and that they didn't believe it to be true when they signed it," Mohler said. "I am not going to defend a certain theological system or heritage, but biblical truth, because I am accountable to that Word of God that is 'sharper than any two-edged sword.'"

In the convention sermon, Mohler said he takes a stand "with the founders of this convention, who preached the gospel without fear and without compromise."

"When a denomination begins to consider doctrine divisive, theology troublesome and conviction inconvenient, consider that denomination on its way to a well-deserved death," he said in his sermon. "We take our stand upon the great essential truths of biblical faith, even when the world is at war with those truths."

The denial of these theological truths and a lack of fear of God are the two perils facing modern society, Mohler told the Founders Conference.

Such "compromise" has taken place "because we are sinners and sinners always rebel against the truth of God," Mohler said.

Mohler found a warm reception from the Founders Conference and from SBC messengers.

After the seminary report, messenger Garry Harred of Mobile, Ala., went to a microphone to commend Mohler. "You continue to stand upon the truth of the Scripture, and we as a Southern Baptist Convention will affirm you," Harred said to loud applause.

But not all agreed.

One messenger made a motion that the SBC "affirm our belief that Jesus Christ died for the sins of the entire world and offers salvation to every human being," a clear reference to refuting the influence of Calvinist theology. No action was taken at the time.

Earlier another messenger questioned Mohler's belief in Calvinism.

David McNair of Jackson, Miss., told messengers he couldn't find Calvinism in his Bible and couldn't understand what Mohler believed.

Mohler responded, "I stand upon the theological convictions upon which my seminary was founded and what the Abstract of Principles says."

He said he would be glad to explain his theological convictions in a one-on-one conversation but could not make a sufficient explanation from the platform in a brief time.

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Seminary alumni officers resign over disagreements with Mohler

By Marv Knox

ATLANTA (ABP) -- The president and past president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary's alumni association have resigned, citing their disagreement with changes brought upon the Louisville, Ky., school by President Albert Mohler.

Alumni president Walter Nunn of Huntsville, Ala., and immediate past president Howard Cobble of Elizabethtown, Ky., resigned their posts moments after the seminary's annual alumni luncheon June 21.

They also reported that Susan McBride of Fredericksburg, Va., who was to have been named president-elect at the luncheon, also has refused to go through with the nomination.

"Some of the changes being implemented in our alma mater grieve us," Nunn told reporters, reading from a statement he and Cobble prepared.

Nunn is pastor of University Baptist Church in Huntsville, and a former president of the Alabama Baptist Convention. Cobble is pastor of Severns Valley Baptist Church in Elizabethtown and former president of the Kentucky Baptist Convention.

"The school which nurtured us spiritually and challenged us intellectually caused our faith to become stronger and the Bible to become more meaningful to us," their statement said.

"From our perspective, the institution is being transformed into a school we do not know. We cannot love that which we do not know. We cannot support that which we do not love. The present Southern Seminary is not the school we attended nor from which we graduated."

The pair cited a litany of reasons why they believe the seminary has changed for the worse.

"A lack of compassion and a heavy-handed administrative style are not consistent with the gospel of love and fellowship," they said in the statement.

"The narrowing of theological parameters for faculty, the lack of concern for the feelings and needs of seminary employees and students, the move by the president to impose his theological biases on the institution and an unwillingness to extend the hand of collegiality and fellowship to all the school's alumni bring us to a position where we can no longer in good conscience provide leadership for the school's alumni."

Mohler has been a controversial figure among Southern Seminary alumni since he succeeded Roy Honeycutt two years ago, vowing to return the seminary to its "historical roots." He was put in place by a majority of trustees elected during the Southern Baptist Convention's rightward shift.

Mohler has stirred acute controversy during the past year. Storms have swirled around his forced termination of theology professor Molly Marshall, the firing of social work Dean Diana Garland, his refusal to hire any professor who thinks God could call a woman to be a pastor and implementation of a policy which threatens to fire any faculty or staff member who publicly disagrees with the president.

Cobble and Nunn said they did not specifically disagree with Mohler over his decisions regarding the social work school and the role of women in the pastorate. However, they cited Mohler's readiness to impose the specifics of his theology on others.

"A big problem for us" is Mohler's decision to hire professors not only on what they will teach but what they

privately believe, Nunn said. He stressed that both he and Cobble firmly "believe the Bible is God's word," so their disagreement with Mohler is not a question of liberalism versus conservatism.

However, "there's a difference between thought and teaching," he added. "This is not an indoctrination center. Graduate theological education is not for kids just out of high school. Students and faculty alike must be allowed freedom to think."

Cobble added he has a problem with Mohler's strong adherence to Calvinism, the theological structure built by 17th century church reformer John Calvin.

Some critics of Calvinism insist it places so much of an emphasis on God's work in salvation that it does not support the evangelistic and missionary notion that "whosoever will" may come to salvation through faith in Christ.

Although Mohler claims to follow the path struck in 1859 by the founders of Southern Seminary, Cobble said the essence of the seminary also has been shaped by a more recent "shift" in theology that emphasizes missions more dramatically.

"I see theology moving to a totally different era than that in which we've been comfortable" for most of the 20th century, Cobble said.

In addition, Cobble said Mohler's "dictum of no disagreement" -- the trustee-approved policy that threatens firing for seminary employees who publicly disagree with Mohler -- is a major concern. He also faulted the president for his "unwillingness to reach out to pastors who affiliate with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship," a new organization of moderates disaffected by the SBC.

Seminary spokesperson Mike Duduit called the alumni leaders' protest "much ado about nothing."

Incoming alumni president Gary Redding, pastor of First Baptist Church of North Augusta, S.C., did not resign, Duduit noted, claiming Nunn and Cobble -- whose terms will end in September -- did not have "formal responsibilities" left to complete.

Mohler "does not have any response," Duduit said.

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Henry re-elected as SBC president

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Florida pastor Jim Henry was elected without opposition to a second term as president of the Southern Baptist Convention June 20.

Johnny Hunt, pastor of First Baptist Church of Woodstock, Ga., nominated Henry, pastor of First Baptist Church of Orlando, to the post.

First-term SBC presidents are traditionally not challenged for a second term. During political wrangling between moderates and conservatives over the last 15 years, however, contested races were common even during the traditional off years. The president is limited to two consecutive one-year terms.

Henry, a conservative, won the SBC presidency last year over Alabama pastor Fred Wolfe, breaking a string of presidents backed by the inerrancy party which used the president's appointive powers to help them gain control of the nation's largest non-Catholic religious group.

Also elected in Atlanta were Larry Wynn, pastor of Hebron Baptist Church in Atlanta, as first vice president, and Gary Frost, pastor of Rising Sun Baptist Church in Youngstown, Ohio, to a second term as second vice president.

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-- By Bob Allen

Supreme Court rules organizers can exclude gays from parade

By Pam Parry

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The nation's high court unanimously ruled June 19 that the Commonwealth of Massachusetts violated the First Amendment rights of private citizens by forcing them to include gay marchers in the St. Patrick's Day parade in Boston.

A veterans' council of private citizens has sponsored the parade since the city stopped doing so in 1947. In 1992, a group of gay, lesbian and bisexual descendants of Irish immigrants formed a group to march in the parade to express pride in their heritage and openly homosexual lifestyle.

The Irish-American Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Group of Boston filed suit when its application to march in the parade was denied. The group claimed the rejection violated a state law prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in places of public accommodation.

The state court ordered inclusion of the gay-rights group, saying the parade lacked any specific "expressive purpose" to warrant protection under the First Amendment. The Massachusetts Supreme Court backed the lower court's ruling.

Forced to allow the gay group to march, the veterans canceled the parade in 1994 rather than promote speech with which they disagreed.

The U.S. Supreme Court reversed the lower court rulings, saying that parades are a form of protected expression because marchers "are making some sort of collective point, not just to each other but to bystanders along the way."

Justice David Souter, writing for the court, said the lower courts' orders forced the council to alter the parade's expressive content, violating the First Amendment rule that a speaker has the right to choose the content of the message. Conversely, a speaker has the right to choose what not to say, he added.

"Our holding today rests not on any particular view about the council's message but on the nation's commitment to protect freedom of speech," Souter wrote. "Disapproval of a private speaker's statement does not legitimize use of the commonwealth's power to compel the speaker to alter the message by including one more acceptable to others."

The case was *Hurley v. Irish-American Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Group of Boston*.

The court also declined to disturb rulings in four other cases that had First Amendment implications:

-- Justices declined to hear a First Amendment challenge to a law that prohibits demonstrators from blocking entrances to abortion clinics. Joyce Woodall, a member of Concerned Women for America, said she prays peacefully in front of entrances to abortion clinics and that the Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances Act leaves her vulnerable to prosecution. The lower courts upheld the constitutionality of the year-old law.

-- The court turned away an Arkansas couple's appeal that they be allowed to maintain a massive Christmas lights display that was deemed a nuisance by the state because it created traffic jams and unsafe road conditions. Mitzi and Jennings Osborne said that the state's forcing them to reduce their display violated their religious beliefs. The lower court ruled that a residential area is not the proper place for "commercial size" decorations.

The Osbornes argued that a new law, the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, protected their right to have such a display. The lower courts ruled that RFRA does not protect a religious exercise unless it is mandatory.

-- The high court refused to listen to constitutional challenges by two men accused of spray painting three Florida churches with anti-religious symbols and words. They said the state law prohibiting the defacing of churches and synagogues violated the First Amendment's Establishment Clause. The state court said that the law did not breach the wall separating church and state.

-- Justices also refused to alter a Florida ruling that the Tampa Police Department did not violate an officer's rights by discharging him because of his refusal to work on his sabbath. Aston Beadle, a member of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, said the department failed to reasonably accommodate his religious practices. The lower

court ruled that forcing the department to alter shifts could result in an undue burden because police work involved public health, safety and welfare.

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CORRECTIONS: In yesterday's ABP story, "SBC renounces racist past before celebrating history," please replace the sixth paragraph with the following:

"The SBC was founded in 1845 in Augusta, Ga., by Baptists in the South seceding from Northern Baptists after the national home missions society refused to appoint slaveholders as missionaries."

In the 11th paragraph, change Gary Frost's office to second vice president.

Also, in the 12th paragraph, please correct the spelling of the name to Carey Kimbrell.

END