

# Associated Baptist Press

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## WRAP-UP

### **Southern Baptists reshape denomination, renounce racist past during 150th meeting**

By Mark Wingfield and Bob Allen

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Southern Baptists looked backward and forward during their 150th annual meeting, repenting of past racism and reorganizing denominational structures for the future, all amid a three-day celebration of their history.

The convention, representing the largest Protestant body in the country, continued to express its affirmation of conservative political causes, passing resolutions opposing Henry Foster's nomination as U.S. surgeon general and advocating a religious-liberty amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

More than 20,000 messengers registered for the June 20-22 meeting in Atlanta's Georgia Dome. That's a slight increase over attendance at last year's annual meeting but less than the 23,500 that attended the last meeting in Atlanta (1991).

Actions on denominational reorganization and repentance for racism were hailed as watershed moments for the denomination.

The resolution on racism drew national media attention, including a front-page story in the New York Times and glowing editorials in the host city's two newspapers. The Atlanta Constitution's editorial called Southern Baptists' action "a courageous act of genuine contrition."

In the convention's closing address, evangelist Billy Graham, the SBC's best-known preacher, praised the action on racism and urged his fellow Baptists to "pull down the barriers which divide."

The racism resolution marked the denomination's first formal acknowledgement that racism played a role in its founding. The SBC seceded from a national Baptist body in 1845 so slaveholders could continue to serve as missionaries.

Many Southern Baptists also opposed the civil-rights movement in the 1960s. In recent years, however, the convention has worked to transcend its white, Southern image. About 1,900 of the 39,910 Southern Baptist churches are predominantly black, according to denominational records.

The resolution apologized to African Americans for "condoning and/or perpetuating individual and systemic racism in our lifetime" and pledged to "eradicate racism in all its forms from the Southern Baptist life and ministry."

Richard Land, head of the Christian Life Commission, the SBC's moral-concerns agency, called the action, "one of the most historic things that has happened in the Southern Baptist Convention in my adult lifetime." The resolution was adopted June 20, a day earlier than normal, so as not to blemish the celebration of the SBC's history later in the day.

Messengers overwhelmingly adopted another resolution opposing the confirmation of U.S. surgeon general nominee Henry Foster, ignoring a warning by one messenger the statement "could be perceived as racist," since Foster is an African American.

The SBC's first black officer, however, second vice president Gary Frost, told reporters that race is not the issue in the convention's opposition to Foster. "There's a clear distinction between racial issues and moral issues," said Frost, pastor of Rising Sun Baptist Church in Youngstown, Ohio. Abortion, which Foster supports and as a physician has performed, "is an abomination before God," Frost said.

Land brushed off charges that the resolution is political. "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."

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

While the First Amendment already protects religious expression, "confusing and contradictory rulings" by the U.S. Supreme Court make passage of a religious-equality amendment necessary, the resolution says.

In other action, the convention approved the most massive organizational overhaul in its history, intended to "streamline the structure and to maximize the ministry." Messengers approved the plan by a two-to-one margin (9,950-to-5,357) with two amendments: one clarifying the role of Woman's Missionary Union and another fine-tuning the work of the new North American Mission Board.

Messengers added a statement proposed by Roy Smith, executive director of the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina, noting that the SBC "welcomes the continued role of WMU in supporting missions." The amendment, supported by prominent conservative pastor John Bisagno of Houston, helped defuse controversy over the report, which critics said was intended to snub the WMU.

Both the blue-ribbon committee which developed the restructuring recommendation and the SBC Executive Committee which brought it to messengers had declined to amend the report to affirm the WMU's role in missions support.

Dellanna O'Brien, executive director of the Birmingham, Ala.,-based auxiliary, said she was "very satisfied" with the amendment, which "affirm(s) WMU's partnership and presence" in the convention. Earlier she told WMU members the plan was unacceptable without some recognition of the work of WMU.

Messengers also accepted minor wording changes suggested by Home Mission Board President Larry Lewis. Without the wording changes, the report would pose a serious threat to the denomination's national church-starting strategy, Lewis warned.

The reorganization dramatically changes the way in which Southern Baptist missions in North America are organized. It eliminates three national agencies with overlapping responsibilities -- the Home Mission Board in Atlanta, Brotherhood Commission in Memphis, Tenn., and Radio and Television Commission in Fort Worth, Texas -- and creates in their place the new North American Mission Board, to be based in Atlanta.

The new board will emphasize evangelism in the U.S. and Canada, with particular emphasis on starting churches in areas where Southern Baptists are new or numerically weak.

Messengers declined to amend the recommendation to leave intact the SBC Historical Commission, one of five agencies dissolved in the restructuring.

Messengers gave an enthusiastic welcome to Baptist evangelist Billy Graham, who disregarded the advice of doctors to address the convention only a week after hospitalization for fatigue and intestinal bleeding.

Graham told messengers he had followed the three-day convention's actions through news accounts. He commended Southern Baptists for the resolution on racism. "Only when we individually and as a corporate group

renounce racism in all of its forms and repent of all transgression will God choose to use us in the future to reach all people throughout the world," he said.

Citing another convention-related issue which had generated widespread discussion, Graham said, "Thank God you put your arms around the WMU."

Messengers celebrated the SBC's sesquicentennial in two gala presentations with drama, pageantry and inspirational remarks. The sessions sketched the convention's history from its 1845 formation in Augusta, Ga., observed a baptism service and wound up with challenges from the presidents of the SBC's two mission boards.

Messengers elected Orlando, Fla., pastor Jim Henry to an unchallenged second term as SBC president. Other officers are Larry Wynn, pastor of Hebron Baptist Church in Atlanta, first vice president, and Gary Frost, pastor of Rising Sun Baptist Church in Youngstown, Ohio, to a second term as second vice president.

Veteran officer Lee Porter won a 19th term as registration secretary over challenger Clayton Springs of Edmond, Okla. Recording secretary David Atchison was elected without opposition to a sixth term as recording secretary.

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-- Greg Warner, Trennis Henderson and Marv Knox contributed to this story.

## **Billy Graham closes SBC with praise, challenge**

By Trennis Henderson

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Billy Graham, Southern Baptists' living legend, closed the Southern Baptist Convention's sesquicentennial session with a rousing call for fellow Baptists to "light a candle that will banish moral and spiritual blight in America and around the world."

Graham's presence electrified the convention's Thursday morning crowd. Messengers and guests interrupted a hymn to give Graham a standing ovation as he stepped onto the convention platform several minutes after he was scheduled to arrive.

Graham, who has preached at the SBC 15 times since 1951, recently was hospitalized in Toronto due to gastro-intestinal bleeding. Despite his illness, Graham assured SBC president Jim Henry he would address the convention "if it's the last breath I've got."

SBC Executive Committee President Morris Chapman, his voice choking with emotion, presented Graham a resolution from the Executive Committee honoring his 50 years of worldwide crusade evangelism. The resolution affirmed Graham as "a model of integrity, exhibiting the humility, grace and courage of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Following special music by George Beverly Shea, Henry introduced Graham as a Baptist hero who consistently demonstrates integrity, vision, inclusiveness and an unequivocal commitment to God's Word.

Describing the sesquicentennial convention as "perhaps one of the greatest historic meetings Southern Baptists have ever had," Henry said Graham "seems to put all together our hopes, our dreams and our prayers of what we can be and what we ought to be as God's people."

Graham commended convention messengers "for your unity and for the tremendous spirit of this convention ... and especially for the resolution that you passed on the race question. Thank God.

"Only when we individually and as a corporate group renounce racism in all of its forms and repent of all transgression will God choose to use us in the future to reach all people throughout the world. God help us to pull down the barriers which divide and to cooperate together to end racism and injustice wherever it may be found."

Citing another convention-related issue which has generated widespread discussion, Graham said, "Thank God that you put your arms around the WMU."

Declaring that founders of the SBC "believed in the blood of Christ and they believed there was a hell and they believed there was a heaven and they believed the Bible was fully inspired of God," Graham added, "Thank God we are staying with our roots. As long as I live, I stand with you."

Concluding the convention's focus on the sesquicentennial theme, "Empowered for the Unfinished Task," Graham preached from II Corinthians 4 about "the person God will use for the unfinished task."

"What kind of a world will the 21st century be?" he asked. "Will the third millennium usher in a golden age of progress and happiness as some people are projecting or will it be a time of political chaos or social upheaval or economic collapse or ecological disaster as others speculate?"

Emphasizing that "we are living in a world beset by problems and upheaval," Graham pointed out, "People the world over have the same deep needs."

He said five specific areas of worldwide human need result from emptiness, loneliness, guilt, insecurity and fear of death.

"In every area of life something is happening that is frightening," he acknowledged. "The pieces are not fitting together and they never will until people discover faith in the Christ who died for us.

"This is the kind of world we are called to minister to. What kind of man or woman should you be for God to use in this unfinished task?

The first key, Graham declared, is to "be sure you know Christ yourself." He added that "I've met too many people in the church and in the pulpit who have never been born again, in my opinion."

Emphasizing the need to boldly preach the gospel without apology, Graham noted, "The apostle Paul said, 'Woe is me if I preach not the gospel.' Let's preach it and declare in with authority -- and the authority comes from this book."

He also stressed the need to preach with simplicity, urgency and to "preach it to a decision."

Graham said another key is to be men and women of prayer. "I am convinced that no evangelism can be accomplished without prayer, deep prayer, and supplication," he said. "Prayer will have a far greater effect on bringing people to Christ than anything else."

While "no one except God knows the future," Graham added, "I believe the Lord is coming and he's coming soon.

"While the devil is at work, God is at work," he declared. "I believe the wheat is going to overcome the tares and we're going to see a mighty moving of the Spirit of God before the end of the age."

"How can we be people that God will continue to use? How can we together be a denomination upon which his blessings will continue to rest?" Graham said the answer is to develop the gifts God has given each Christian.

"I do not believe that we should spend our time cursing the darkness; I don't believe we ought to spend our time pulling up the weeds. Let's let our light shine and let's let the wheat grow and overcome the weeds.

"Let's light a candle that will banish moral and spiritual blight around the world," Graham urged. "Let's light a candle that rolls back racism and social injustice.

"Let's light a candle of renewed faith in the authority of Scripture and a new dedication to missions and evangelism that will cause the devil to tremble and the saints to be encouraged and the lost to trust in Christ," he concluded. "Let's light a candle that by God's grace will never be put out."

Editor's note: The following story updates and replaces yesterday's version. New information is in the next-to-final graph. It also, in the 8th paragraph, corrects Jeff Lowe's title.

## 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, 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, associate 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 approved 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, opposed the patenting of animal and human genes and pledged prayerful support for victims of the April 19 bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. Another resolution expressed appreciation for the American Baptist Theological Seminary, an African American school in Nashville, Tenn.

A massive SBC reorganization approved earlier in the meeting will eliminate a commission established in 1913 to provide support for the seminary, a theological school for 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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## 'Authenticus Bapticus' growing extinct, Dilday tells ABC crowd

By Larry Chesser

SYRACUSE, N.Y. (ABP) -- "Authenticus Baptistus" is an endangered species, Russell Dilday told a group of American Baptists June 20.

Addressing a luncheon sponsored by the Ministers and Missionaries Benefit Board of the American Baptist Churches U.S.A., Dilday, a former Southern Baptist seminary official, spelled out threats to authentic Baptists, as well as keys to removing the species from the endangered list.

The luncheon, attended by about 1,000 people, was held in conjunction with the ABC's biennial meeting.

Dilday was fired in March 1994 as president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, for opposing conservative reforms at the Southern Baptist Convention school. He is now professor and interim dean at George W. Truett Theological Seminary, affiliated with Baylor University in Waco, Texas.

While Baptists share a number of "convictional genes" -- including beliefs about God, Christ, salvation, scripture, church and ordinances -- Dilday said, the dominant Baptist gene is freedom.

Freedom is "so deeply ingrained within our life essence that it becomes an identifier, the primary description of who we are."

Like all denominations, Dilday said, Baptists are threatened by the baby boomers' rejection of denominational brand names. This has led, he said, to churches dropping the word "Baptist" from their name to reach a broader constituency.

"They prefer the Church in the Wildwood or on the Parking Lot, or the Church of Willow Back or Saddle Creek," he said.

Dilday insisted that the most serious threat to authentic Baptists -- "Authenticus Baptistus" -- is not a hostile government imposing limits on the free exercise of religion. "The real threat is from within, from pseudo-Baptists, rogues inside the family who either never knew or have forgotten what our true identity is," he said.

Reshapers of Baptist identity, Dilday said, use a lot of pressure, "sometimes subtle, sometimes a sledge hammer," to move people into agreement with their position.

"As more and more naive Baptists give in to pressures, as more and more new young Baptists come up without understanding history, and as the resolute opposition to these reshapers gives way out of growing weary with combatting them, then slowly Authenticus Baptistus becomes extinct."

Dilday offered several "modest proposals" for preserving the authentic Baptist species:

- Recycle the enduring concept of the autonomy of the local church.

"Denominational headquarters for true Baptists has been, always will be the local congregation," he said.

- Cultivate the primary role of lay leadership in the church.

"Recently some of our SBC pastors used some creative hermeneutics to show that the Bible teaches that pastors are rulers of the church," he said. "That ought to raise the hackles of every true Baptist anywhere who hears it."

- Weed out creedalism in any form.

Baptists may be nudged toward creeds by the "aimless uncertainty" of post-modern culture and the "bland absence of conviction," he said. "But authentic Baptists will always resist that temptation and maintain our historic aversion to any man-made creeds."

- Reseed a new crop of leaders for theological education.

"Seminaries are important," he said. "You have there an opportunity to shape the shapers of the future and to have a hand in redirecting that future."

Critics of seminaries realize their importance, Dilday said, noting that fundamentalist leaders in the SBC sought early on to get control of the seminaries.

- Plant some new alliances among free and faithful believers.

Networking is a powerful way forward, Dilday said. "I'm not talking about creating a new denomination or some kind of new political party but networking" that promotes a shared vision of Baptist freedom.

"As Baptists begin to listen to one another and talk to one another and build these bridges with like-minded believers, and as the Lord blesses that quest, then this shared vision becomes a spontaneous emergence. That's really the Baptist way."

- Filter out the pollution of entanglement of church and state.

"Legislation being proposed in Washington that threatens to undermine the First Amendment's establishment clause ought to awaken every true Baptist," he said.

The power that Christians are to employ "is not political power, not conscriptive power, not government power, but spiritual power."

- Be Baptist.

"Let's be free. Let's exercise our individual freedom and responsibility," he said.

"We need some Baptist freedom fighters. ... We need modern-day Jeremiahs who are unpurchasable, who are unshaken by the slander of their enemies, who refuse to compromise."