

Associated Baptist Press

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Fellowship may not last, speaker tells Florida group

By Bob Allen

GAINESVILLE, Fla. (ABP) -- The greatest threat facing the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship is it will become a one-generation movement, Georgia pastor Bill Self told a Florida Fellowship gathering Feb. 10.

Speaking at an evangelism conference held prior to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Florida's annual winter meeting, Self warned moderate Baptists to get over losing control of the Southern Baptist Convention to conservatives and to focus instead on strengthening churches.

"The war is over," said Self, pastor of John's Creek Baptist Church in Alpharetta, Ga., referring to the decade-long struggle between moderates and conservatives for control of the 15 million-member SBC.

Self charged the Fellowship, a five-year-old coalition, is more intent on building a denominational structure reminiscent of the SBC than resourcing churches.

"Why do we look like a dead institution?" he asked. "I think we think it's coming back. If you listen closely, ... down underneath is a desire for it to come back like it used to be."

"We need to understand the old days are not coming back," Self said. "Elvis is dead and is not coming back. The point is that's gone. You may like that music and you may like that style, but it's gone."

Self, pastor of a rapidly growing congregation in an affluent Atlanta suburb, also issued a sharp critique of fellow moderates for what he called a subtle anti-church-growth mentality.

"I think down inside of us is a death wish for the church," Self said. "I'm sorry, but I've been to my last ensmallment campaign for a church. I think we're afraid to let God loose and do something in the church."

Self cited a 1995 conference on "church growth with integrity" sponsored by the Baptist Center for Ethics as evidence of an anti-growth mentality in the Fellowship.

"Why is it that when CBF or the ethics group does a church-growth conference, it puts a qualifier, 'with

integrity?" Self asked. "I don't see 'with integrity' after missions."

"All of our work must have integrity. Isn't that why we are in CBF?" Self said.

"I've been in churches that grow and I've been in churches that do not grow and growing is best," Self said. "Those who run numbers down don't ever run them up. Those of you all bent out of shape about numbers don't understand how the game is played."

"Unless we have some strong churches, we are going to be a one-generation movement," Self warned. "Who's going to go to our seminaries we are creating? Who's going to go to our colleges? Who's going to go to our missions programs we are creating? Are we going to be a one-generation mission agency?"

Robert Parham, head of the Baptist Center for Ethics in Nashville, Tenn., said Self's remarks "are unfortunate and mischaracterize BCE's successful church growth with integrity conferences."

Some church-growth advocates use methods that lack integrity, Parham noted, but that does not mean that integrity rules out church growth. The BCE's conferences and resources have "clearly underscored the need for balanced church growth which includes spiritual, ethical, evangelistic and numerical growth," Parham said.

Churches make great sacrifices to align with the Fellowship, Self said, including giving up "a depth of literature."

Self said literature produced by the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board is unsuitable for Fellowship churches because of the conservative theological agenda it promotes, but alternatives are still lacking.

"The point is Smyth and Helwys is wonderful, but they don't quite know how our churches operate yet and there's not one-size-fits-all in our churches," he said. Smyth and Helwys is a moderate Baptist publishing company in Macon, Ga.

Cecil Staton, president and publisher of Smyth and Helwys, responded, "As a young publishing house, we make no claims of providing the breadth of products available from the Baptist Sunday School Board," but that the company does seek to respond to needs expressed by users.

"All of our resources are based on sensible theology and contain the depth requested by moderate churches," Staton said.

The "biggest tragedy," Self said, is the Fellowship does not help moderate pastors find new churches, even in cases where promoting the Fellowship in a congregation ends up costing the pastor his job.

Moderate pastors who seek to lead their churches into the Fellowship find they are a "free agent" when it comes time to find a new church, he said.

"I've put my neck on the line and nobody's going to help me?" Self protested.

"We've got to get over our fear of leadership. ... The old Southern Baptist system is not bad. I get tired of people saying 'I don't want the old SBC.' It built us. It wasn't a bad system. It was stolen from us."

Self acknowledged his remarks sounded harsh. "Maybe Self is venting a little, but you all are my therapy group," he told the Fellowship group.

"If I have any criticism it's a loving criticism," Self said. "I don't know if you have a church that's more committed to CBF than I have," he told about 250 people attending the meeting at First Baptist Church in Gainesville, Fla.

David Wilkinson, the Fellowship's communications coordinator, said Self "has offered some friendly advice in a positive spirit."

"He has addressed some important issues, and I think that's good for us," Wilkinson said. "I may not agree wholeheartedly with everything he had to say, but this kind of constructive critique from the vantage point of an experienced Baptist pastor ought always to be welcomed in the Fellowship."

Self was the moderate candidate for SBC president in 1979, the year Tennessee mega-church pastor Adrian Rogers won the office, launching a string of wins by conservative candidates lasting through the 1980s. Using their appointive powers, the conservative presidents gradually steered convention agencies sharply to the right.

Moderates displaced by the conservative juggernaut formed the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in 1991 to provide alternatives to SBC programs under conservative control. The Florida Fellowship is one of several state and regional affiliates of the national coalition.

Despite his criticism of the Fellowship, Self said his pilgrimage as a disenfranchised moderate in the SBC has reinvigorated his view of ministry in a local church.

"This is the best time I've ever lived as a pastor," Self said. "Once I realized Elvis was dead I didn't have to do it like everyone else. I didn't have to be a four-star church."

"I've cried my last tear over the fact that Elvis is gone," Self said. "I've gotten over my anger."

"I'm not hanging out crepe around our place and I'm not planning any funerals because we are planning for a brand new day," Self said.

Pat Anderson, coordinator of the Florida Fellowship and current moderator of CBF nationwide, closed the two-day meeting with a message proclaiming the group inheritor of a "Baptist birthright" forsaken by conservatives in the SBC.

The Fellowship stands for inclusive fellowship, the separation of church and state and the priesthood of all believers, Anderson said.

"These birthright issues are seminal," Anderson said. "They matter. They have enhanced value due to the sufferings and deaths of many of our Baptist forebears."

"Let's forsake the comfort of silence for the work of responsible stewardship for the birthright we have inherited," Anderson said.

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New Orleans search group recommends next president

NEW ORLEANS (ABP) -- A search committee at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary has chosen popular faculty member Chuck Kelley as its nominee for next president of the Southern Baptist Convention school.

The 12-member search committee is unanimously recommending Kelley, 43, to the post, committee chairman Morris Anderson announced Feb. 8. Seminary trustees will vote on Kelley's nomination Feb. 22-23.

If elected, Kelley would become eighth president of the 80-year-old seminary, the nation's third-largest, with 5,500 students. He would succeed Billy Smith, who has served as interim president since last December's retirement of Landrum Leavell, who led the seminary 20 years.

Kelley has been Roland Q. Leavell professor of evangelism at New Orleans Seminary since 1983. He is a popular preacher and has written numerous books and articles on evangelism training.

During a 13-month search for a new president, the committee was reportedly turned down by two candidates -- SBC president Jim Henry of Orlando, Fla., last summer and Fred Lowery of Bossier City, La., last fall.

Kelley has been on the committee's list the whole time, but the group did not go to him earlier because he has no experience as a pastor or in academic administration, Ed Johnson, chairman of trustees, told the New Orleans Times-Picayune.

Still, the committee believes it has the right candidate, Johnson added. "He's not the third choice," Johnson, of Ocala, Fla., said. "If we are led to him as God's man, then he is God's first choice."

Kelley is regarded as a conservative, but he is not outspoken in denominational politics. He is brother-in-law to Paige Patterson, a founder of the conservative movement that captured control of the 15 million-member convention during the 1980s.

News of Kelley's nomination was well-received on campus. He is somewhat reserved personally, but has a first-rate professional reputation, an acquaintance told the New Orleans newspaper.

Kelley's wife, Rhonda, is the daughter of the famous evangelist Bob Harrington, who was dubbed the "chaplain of Bourbon Street" for his long and successful ministry in New Orleans. She is a speech-pathologist consultant and an adjunct professor at New Orleans Seminary. She was managing editor and a contributor to a new

"Woman's Study Bible" produced by Thomas Nelson Publishers and is host of a twice-weekly talk show called "Woman to Woman" on local radio and cable television in New Orleans.

Kelley is a native of Beaumont, Texas, and a graduate of Baylor University. He holds a master's and a doctor's degree from New Orleans Seminary.

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-- By ABP staff. Bruce Nolan of the New Orleans Times-Picayune contributed to this story.

Louisiana Baptist exec announces retirement

ALEXANDRIA, La. (ABP) -- Louisiana Baptist Executive Director Mark Short has announced plans to retire at the end of 1996.

Short, 67, has led the 400,000-member Louisiana Baptist Convention nine years. Before that, he taught church administration at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary.

"I have been impressed by the Holy Spirit to announce this decision early in 1996, in order that our administrative subcommittee will have enough time to seek God's appointed leader for this task," Short said in his resignation letter.

The 16-member administrative subcommittee will begin to seek a successor to Short, said Bobby Swanner, chairman of the state convention's Executive Board.

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-- By ABP staff. From reporting by Lynn Clayton.

Bulgarian Protestants protest 'unfavorable' treatment

SOFIA, Bulgaria (ABP) -- Several Protestant churches in Bulgaria have complained of "unfavorable" treatment from government officials and the media.

The Bulgarian Evangelical Alliance issued a "cry for help" in form of an official declaration to Bulgaria's president and to the World Council of Churches, according to Ecumenical News International.

Among concerns noted by the group is a claim that the Bulgarian Orthodox Church has asked the government to ban all Protestant churches. About 87 percent of Bulgarians are members of the Orthodox Church.

The statement claims that some legitimate churches have been labeled as sects.

"[We] appeal to you to express [our] concern about ... the campaign conducted already for several years against sects," states the declaration. "Because of the lack of clarity regarding the definition of which groups are sects and which are not, the mass media are treating intentionally as sects the recognized evangelical denominations, some of which have been in Bulgaria for more than 100 years."

The members of the evangelical alliance are the Baptist Union of Bulgaria, the Pentecostal Union, the Congregational Church, the Church of God and the Methodist Church.

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Argentine Baptist calls for end to subsidies for church

BUENOS AIRES, Argentina (ABP) -- A Baptist leader in Argentina has called for an end to government subsidies for the Roman Catholic Church.

In an article in the El Puente newspaper, prominent Baptist leader Arnoldo Canclini said the subsidies are a legacy of the country's colonial past and show preference to one particular church, reported Ecumenical News International.

This year, Argentina will pay about \$8.5 million in subsidies to the Catholic Church. While the subsidies have been reduced in recent years, the fact that the Catholic Church "depends on the government, even minimally ... implies a contribution from non-Catholic contributors," Canclini said.

An estimated 93 percent of Argentina's 34-million citizens are Catholic.

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-- By ABP staff

CLARIFICATION: Information in this Feb. 8 story about the Florida state board of missions meeting was taken from a news report in the Florida Baptist Witness. Since that story, Florida Baptist officials clarified that the effort to disfellowship the three churches is not final. The credentials committee will not act on the state board's recommendation until after the report of an ad hoc committee in May.

Please replace Thursday's story with this version. There are changes in paragraphs No. 1,2,6,36 and 41.

Florida Baptist mission board excludes charismatic churches (revised)

By Bob Allen

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (ABP) -- Three churches face ouster by the Florida Baptist Convention for "neo-Pentecostalism," a charge that pastors of two of the churches deny.

Florida's state board of missions voted Jan. 26 to recommend that membership credentials be denied to Citrus Christian Ministries, formerly First Baptist Church of Homassassa Springs; Riverside Christian Fellowship, formerly Riverside Baptist Church, in Hernando; and Main Street Baptist Church in Inverness pending a review of the churches' teaching by an ad hoc committee.

Last year, Alachua Baptist Association voted to disfellowship the Homassassa Springs congregation. The Inverness church resigned from membership in the association in August, followed by the Hernando congregation in October

According to a news report in the Florida Baptist Witness, Florida Baptist Executive Director John Sullivan told state board members the three Central Florida churches recognize speaking in tongues as a measure of filling of the Holy Spirit, restoration of the office of apostle and the "laughing revival" associated with the controversial Toronto Airport Vineyard church.

"I urge that we stand along with this association," Sullivan told board members prior to the vote. "You cannot just believe anything or everything and be Baptist."

It is thought to be the first time the Florida convention has ever moved to disfellowship a church.

Pastors of two of the churches, however, told Associated Baptist Press that Sullivan's quote did not accurately describe their views, that leaving the association had more to do with personality conflicts than doctrine and that Florida Baptist leaders made no effort to investigate charges before taking action against them.

Leary Willis Jr., pastor of Main Street Baptist Church in Inverness, said his church voted to withdraw from Alachua Association not over charismatic doctrine but "in a spirit of Christian love, simply recognizing we could no longer walk with the association."

Willis denied the church advocates non-Baptist teaching, but acknowledged "we may not be viewed by some as a traditional Southern Baptist congregation."

"Our church worships in a very strong charismatic style," Willis acknowledged. "We're not Pentecostal, but our worship style is charismatic."

Since leaving the association, Willis said the church has continued to support the Southern Baptist and state conventions through gifts to the Cooperative Program unified budget and support for state and national missions offerings.

The church also subscribes to "The Baptist Faith and Message," a statement of consensus Baptist beliefs approved by the SBC in 1963, he said.

"The only place we deviate with it is a statement concerning the baptism of the Holy Spirit," he said, which the church describes as "a gift" providing "evidence of power" for witnessing.

The church "believes all gifts of the Holy Spirit as described in Scripture are still in existence today and are for our church," he said. Speaking in tongues is mentioned in a listing of spiritual gifts in I Corinthians 12 and is "a valid gift for the church today, as are all gifts," Willis said.

Willis denied his church supports the "laughing revival" phenomenon. "We are in no way a part of that. We have never espoused any part of the laughing revival."

"We don't depart too far from what most Baptist churches are doing today in areas of practice," Willis said. "Our worship style is more contemporary, thus called charismatic. Many Southern Baptists are moving toward a contemporary style of worship."

Chuck Brennan, pastor of Riverside Christian Fellowship in Hernando said his church decided to leave the association over a dispute that "has been going on for about three years."

The association "tried to vote us out three years in a row," unsuccessfully, he said. "Finally, this year they brought it up again and we resigned. We're tired of putting up with it."

Brennan said he believes opposition to his church was the result of "a personal vendetta" by "one or two pastors" in the association more than theology.

Brennan said describing the church's teaching as "neo-Pentecostalism" is "totally in error, mainly because they don't even understand what the term is."

"I'm disappointed because the state convention only went on one side," Brennan said. "They didn't bother to check with us or anything else. I'm really disappointed in our leadership for their lack of checking the facts."

Asked about a reference made in the news story to papers outlining the three churches' doctrinal beliefs and allegations they support the "laughing revival" concept, Brennan said, "I have no idea what they're talking about; none of that is applicable to us."

Efforts to reach Jimmy Sheats, pastor of Citrus Christian Ministries in Homassassa Springs, failed. Joseph Maddox, director of missions at Alachua Association, did not return a reporter's phone call.

Sullivan was out of the country on a mission trip and unavailable for comment. State convention spokesman Don Hepburn said, however, that leaders of the convention had reviewed material provided by the churches to the Alachua Association's credentials committee. Based on those documents, Sullivan concluded "the theology practiced by those three congregations represented neo-Pentecostalism" and "in his view did not represent Baptist polity or theology," Hepburn said.

Hepburn said the state board "decided to stand beside the association" in the dispute, "even though we are not bound by what the association does or does not do."

The state convention recognizes about 25 "state-at-large" churches that participate in the state convention but not a local association, Hepburn said. A state convention study committee is currently looking at the question of what constitutes "a cooperating church," he said.

Willis and Brennan said they believe charismatic-leaning congregations will come under increasing scrutiny, but that local churches have a right to interpret the Bible for themselves.

"We believe in the whole Bible," Brennan said. "'The Baptist Faith and Message' is a great writing, but that's not Scripture. We use the Scripture as the basis for establishing our doctrine."

"We believe in all the spiritual gifts and we believe they are applicable for today and, of course, tongues is one of them," Brennan said. "But the Bible says it's the least of the gifts. We realize it is a gift and if God chooses to give it to one of our people, I don't want to be the one to tell God, 'I don't want what you're giving me.'"

Brennan said "there are many churches in the Florida convention and across the United States" that hold similar views. He predicted other congregations will be singled out for charismatic practice.

"I believe they are going to be starting a witch hunt," he said. "I believe it's going to tear up our Southern Baptist Convention even more than the moderate-conservative-liberal thing did a few years ago."

The basic Baptist notion is that "each church is autonomous" to make its own decisions about doctrine and worship style, Brennan said. "That's not the basis for fellowship. The basis for fellowship is Jesus Christ."

"Not once has anyone in the association or state convention ever accused us of being unscriptural," Brennan said. "They only accused us of not doing it according to 'The Baptist Faith and Message' and Baptist tradition."

"We are a fundamentalist church," echoed Willis. "We believe the Bible is inerrant; the infallible word of God. We stand on the Bible."

"I thought this battle for the Bible was over. We believe the Bible all the way, but we are being disfellowshipped because our practice is a little bit different than what they could consider acceptable practice."

Since being targeted by the state convention, Willis said he has been "inundated" with phone calls from other churches with similar leanings wondering if they will be next.

Hepburn said he does not believe the ouster of the three churches is a "test case" for charismatic worship in the state convention, but "is certainly providing us background" for the committee studying what constitutes a "cooperating" church or association.

Traditionally, associations have exercised freedom to discipline local churches on doctrinal grounds, while state conventions and the Southern Baptist Convention have based good standing on support of denominational programs.

"We strongly believe that historically and presently the association is the theological watchdog in Southern Baptist life," Hepburn said. "But the other side of the coin is that churches as autonomous groups can affiliate or not affiliate with the local association, the state convention and the SBC. As a result, we -- the state convention -- are trying to deal with 2,400 autonomous churches across the state and have reached the point where we have to develop a theological framework that will serve as a guide to help us determine who are folks like us and who are not."

Sullivan "strongly believes the Bible must serve as the basis for this theological framework," Hepburn said.

The action by the state board of missions calls for an ad hoc committee to meet further with the pastors of the three churches "to discuss the doctrinal and practice issues" raised by Alachua Association. An original motion called for denying messenger credentials to the three churches at the annual state convention meeting and to refuse their gifts to the Cooperative Program, the convention's unified budget.

A motion by Clytee Harness of Elfers, however, recommended against refusing gifts pending further discussion, since that move would disqualify the pastors from participating in denominational retirement programs. "If we discover in the May (board) meeting (the complaint) is valid, we will return their funds," Harness said. The state mission board approved his motion.

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