

Associated Baptist Press

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APR 13 1996

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

March 7, 1996

(96-22)

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Following are stories from the Christian Life Commission's annual seminar. We plan to have a wrapup tomorrow.

America 'one wrong turn' from disaster, Bauer says

By Bob Allen

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- While the United States has noted "extraordinary achievement" economically and in world leadership during the 20th century, many citizens sense "America is one wrong turn away from disaster," conservative Christian activist Gary Bauer told a Baptist gathering March 4.

Bauer, president of the Family Research Council, a conservative, pro-family lobbying group in Washington, urged Baptists attending the March 4-6 Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission's annual national seminar to be "salt and light" in a nation gone wrong.

"The first thing that has gone wrong is we have forgotten God, and having forgotten God we have unleashed the hounds of hell in our streets," said Bauer.

America has also "separated the idea of virtue from liberty," Bauer continued. "Every one of our founders believed that only a virtuous people could remain free. The whole Constitution is based on that idea. That is why we were given a limited government."

"Today, the pop culture teaches our children that virtue is old fashioned, different strokes for different folks, if it feels good do it," Bauer said. "If that notion gains credence among the American people, it will doom democracy."

Bauer urged Christians to vote only for candidates "who are willing without shame or embarrassment" to defend biblical and pro-family values.

"If you do that then I am absolutely convinced that someday soon every one of us will be able to say once again that America is a shining city set on a hill," Bauer said.

In response to a question, Bauer declined to endorse any of the Republican presidential candidates. Bauer said his organization has "worked with all the candidates to move them more closely to values we believe in."

"I think there is a tendency right now for many Christian conservatives to identify themselves with the Republican Party," Bauer said. Acknowledging that he "obviously" is a Republican, Bauer, a former staff member in the Reagan White House, continued: "I think it would be a mistake if we began to think of ourselves as Republicans first or Democrats first."

"I think if there is a Republican nominee that wants our votes and then begins to play games with us, we ought to call his hand, even if it might help the president, who frankly we don't like," he said.

In response to another question, Bauer expressed frustration "that so many churches are non-combatants in the great issues of our day."

"If I hear another pastor say he can't deal with the sanctity of human life ... because that's political, I think I'll scream," he said.

"That is what some of the pastors did when Hitler came to power, (they said) 'That's politics'," Bauer said.

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Efforts to legitimize gay lifestyles called threat to religious liberty

By Bob Allen

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Efforts to legitimize gay and lesbian lifestyles place America "probably at the most critical crossroads in our history," conservative Christian lawyer Jay Sekulow told a Baptist gathering March 4.

"The greatest threat to religious liberty today is the growing movement for what I would call same-sex marriages and the shift in our culture that the family can be defined as whatever someone wants to define it," Sekulow said.

Sekulow, chief litigator for Pat Robertson's American Center for Law and Justice, spoke at the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission's 29th annual national seminar, titled "Christians in the Public Square: Faith in Practice?", held March 4-6 in Washington.

Sekulow told the Baptist group that the ACLJ is opposing a law in Hawaii allowing same-sex marriages, terming it "incomprehensible" that such a law should even be discussed, let alone litigated.

"I am convinced the gay and lesbian groups picked Hawaii for a reason," Sekulow said. Many Americans view Hawaii more like a foreign country than a state and, because of its distance from the mainland, regard it as insignificant, he said.

Should the law be upheld, Sekulow predicted, "the gay and lesbian groups will send 50 couples over to Hawaii, one from each state" to be married. "They're going to say that what takes place in Hawaii, if same-sex marriages are approved, that they should get the same recognition in California and Washington, D.C.," he said.

"This is an attack that could destroy and undercut this culture so significantly that it could change the way we view ourselves as a people," Sekulow said.

"For the sake of the proclamation of the gospel, we need to win this fight," Sekulow said. "If they can legitimize this, the effectiveness of our gospel will be significantly undercut."

Despite that concern, Sekulow said, "At the same time, I have a lot of optimism. I think the church is going to rise to the occasion. The abortion issue didn't do it. Maybe this one will."

Sekulow urged Baptists to exercise their faith in the public square. "I think we're supposed to be involved in politics. We're supposed to be salt and light," Sekulow said. "We are offering this culture its only way out and that's through the gospel of Jesus Christ."

Conservative Christian activists find Washington a hostile place, however, he added.

"We live in a culture that says those of us who have faith are often times not only marginalized, but trivialized," Sekulow said. "It used to be thought that faith in Jesus was an admirable thing. The whole civil-rights movement ... found its foundation in black churches in this country."

Now, however, "our very government does everything in its power to marginalize and trivialize our position," Sekulow said. "If I was called to the White House, I would ask President Clinton a couple of questions. 'Why did you write in a letter last week that you prayed about your decision on partial-birth abortions?'"

"He prayed about it. I don't know who he's praying to. How dare he invoke prayer and religiosity? I think he not only is wrong. How dare he do it?"

Sekulow said Christians should demand a voice that is not only tolerated in public discourse but regarded as a valid point of view.

"We have to engage this culture being unapologetically Christian," he said. "That doesn't mean you take your black leather Bible and start pounding it, but every once in a while there's nothing wrong with doing that."

"Who are we but agents of the King?" Sekulow asked. "And if we think as agents of the King we have something to say that's important, then goodness knows I don't want to be simply tolerated."

While the First Amendment prohibits laws based on Christian dogma, common sense says that society should share the values promoted by Christianity, Sekulow said.

"While we cannot win in a court room because God said so, we can win because what God said was right," he said.

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US asking "what," not "why," Hawkins tells CLC seminar

By Bob Allen

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The United States of America is "morally bankrupt" because it has followed a "liberal philosophy" that asks "what" instead of "why," Texas pastor O.S. Hawkins said at a national Baptist seminar March 4.

"The United States is morally bankrupt in large part because we have been led by a liberal philosophy that has made false assumptions about two particular things: the nature of the universe and the nature of mankind," said Hawkins, pastor of First Baptist Church of Dallas.

Hawkins spoke at the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission's 29th annual national seminar, titled "Christians in the Public Square: Faith in Practice?" held March 4-6 in Washington.

"Liberal philosophy seldom asks why, it only asks what," Hawkins said.

For that reason, America seeks to clean up problems like drug abuse and AIDS rather than to analyze the root causes of social problems, he said.

"What would happen if the president of the United States would stand up before the American people and stop asking what and begin to ask why?" he said.

Hawkins drew a list of "why" questions from the Old Testament book of Jeremiah, where God asks ancient Judah: "Why has this people slidden back? Why do we sit still? Why have they provoked me to anger? Why is there no recovery?"

Hawkins dated America's moral decline to the Supreme Court's 1963 ruling forbidding prayer in public schools, noting that the last 30 years have been marked by trouble for children and schools.

He also complained that religious appeals increasingly are ignored in seats of power.

"Speak of the judgment of God in this city and you'll be scoffed at and laughed out of town," Hawkins said. "We've rejected the word of the Lord for men's liberal agenda and we wonder why people have slidden back."

Hawkins took regular jabs at President Bill Clinton during his address.

He first criticized Clinton for defending last year's United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China, as "true blue to families" while the conference discussed lesbianism and featured a prayer to "Mother Earth."

"And the leader of the free world says it was true blue to families," Hawkins said. "Why has this people slidden back?"

Later, he alluded to Clinton again after stating, "America's biggest problem is an apathetic church that has lost its first love and thus its influence."

"When I see political leaders with their liberal agendas contrary to the Word of God coming out of church on Sunday being photographed with Bibles in their hands and waving to the television cameras, the words of Jeremiah 7:9-10 echo in my mind," he said. "Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, burn incense to Baal and walk after other gods whom you do not know and then come and stand before me in the house that is called by my name and say 'we are delivered to do all these abominations?'"

He targeted Clinton again, making a point that, "It is one thing to be immoral, but another to encourage a moral decline in the land."

"We have had presidents of the United States in the past who have been known for immoral acts. But it is quite another thing to encourage immorality through people and policies," he said.

"A leader encourages moral decline in the land when he takes a pen in hand and signs an executive order permitting the bodies of aborted babies to be used in research. A leader encourages a moral decline in the land when he appoints an AIDS czar who quickly says America is 'a repressed Victorian society' and tells the populace, including teenagers, to seek pleasure in sex."

While criticizing liberals and politicians, Hawkins said the church bears the most blame for increasing secularization in culture.

"Don't blame the politicians for a moral collapse. It belongs at the feet of the church," he said.

"We have a generation in America that does not know Christ primarily because we have not made him known," Hawkins said.

Even Christians have bought into values of the liberal philosophy, Hawkins said.

"Many Americans have bought into the liberal lies, media manipulation and public propaganda, while the church sits by with a false confidence based on lying words," Hawkins said.

"Don't listen to those who say religious principles played little part in the founding of the United States," Hawkins said. "Don't listen to those who say that we basically were not built on a Judeo-Christian philosophy but on more of a pluralistic deistic philosophy."

"Forever etched in the charters of the 13 original colonies is the gospel truth," he said, quoting charters of early states. According to their charters, Maryland was "formed by a pious zeal to extend the Christian gospel," Delaware was "formed for the further propagation of the holy gospel" and Connecticut to "preserve the purity of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ," Hawkins said.

"There's talk of Washington, D.C., becoming the 51st state. Can you imagine what their charter might read?" he quipped.

Christians failed to make a difference in Nazi Germany, ethicist says

By Bob Allen

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The rise of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Holocaust that killed 6 million Jews happened because Christians failed "to make a difference" in Germany in the years preceding World War II, Baptist ethicist David Gushee said at a national seminar March 5.

The Christian response to Hitler "is a story so tragic, with Christian failure so glaring and with consequences so horrendous that it needs to be burned into the consciousness of every Christian person who walks on the face of the earth," said Gushee, author of the recent book "The Righteous Gentiles of the Holocaust."

Gushee, assistant professor of Christian ethics at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., spoke at the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission's 29th annual national seminar, titled "Christians in the Public Square: Faith in Practice?", held March 4-6 in Washington.

"German Christians failed because they carried into the crisis years a badly truncated political vision," Gushee said.

Learning from Germany's example, "we must not understand the political life of our own or any nation merely as a struggle between a purer-than-the-driven-snow Christianity on the one hand" and godless secularism on the other, Gushee said.

"Sometimes it is a struggle between competing versions of Christianity," he said. "It is perversions of Christian faith that pose the greatest danger," he said.

Many Christians in Nazi Germany not only failed to oppose Hitler, but even welcomed his appeals to rebuilding national pride and his promoting of "positive Christianity." Many German Protestants either ignored or were not bothered by the Nazi Party platform's caveat that Christianity should be consistent "with the moral feelings of the German race" and Hitler's scapegoating of Jews for all of Germany's ills, Gushee said.

German Protestants were susceptible to Hitler's propaganda for four reasons, Gushee said, noting parallels for Christians involved in American politics today:

-- A "longstanding identification of traditional German cultural values with Christianity."

The Nazis called for patriotism, hard work, thriftiness, loyalty, obedience, moral decency and honor, Gushee said. "They were 'family-values' candidates of the first order," he said, borrowing a term from current debate.

Christians in Nazi Germany made the mistake of "collapsing their understanding of the Christian faith in morality into total identification with these values" while ignoring other biblical norms such as the call for peacemaking and justice for all people, Gushee said.

"Far too frequently we Christians do the same thing today," Gushee commented. "We pick a cluster of values and baptize these as Christian. We vote for politicians who articulate those cultural values and are especially enthusiastic about those who skillfully baptize these values in a Christian vocabulary."

"When we do this, we fall prey to a cultural captivity that robs the church of its independence and of any ability to separate the wheat from the chaff," he said.

-- A "self-interest desire" to maintain favored political and legal status in the nation.

Though Hitler was secretly anti-Christian, he came to power by assuring churches they were "the most important factor safeguarding our national heritage" and promising churches the influence due them as the institutions providing "the unshakable foundations of our people's ethical and moral life," Gushee said.

Gushee urged Christians today to avoid being manipulated by politicians who promise them political gain. "A church that is consumed by self-interest is no different than any other player in the political arena," he said.

-- A "long history of Christian anti-Semitism" that "left the church open to Nazi racism and political anti-Semitism."

"Because all human beings are made in the image of God and are equally and immeasurably valuable in his sight, anti-Semitism or any form of racial hatred is sufficient to disqualify a political party or political leader from Christian consideration," Gushee said.

"Do Christians know this today?" Gushee queried, noting that anti-Semitism was "such a part and parcel of average Protestant life in 1920s Germany" that few Christians were troubled by Hitler's announced plans to deport Jews.

-- An "erosion of thoughtful theological orthodoxy" which "left the churches open to theological and moral confusion about what Adolf Hitler was."

Gushee blamed classical theological liberalism, which had its headquarters in Germany, with undermining confidence in the Bible's authority and truthfulness, opening Germans to all kinds of theological experimentation and weakening the resistance of German churches to Nazism.

Because of that, German churches "were bamboozled" by a Hitler who presented himself as a kind of political messiah.

"This accusation is not original to me but emerged from within Germany itself from such people as Karl Barth and others," Gushee said.

Gushee warned that "flabby" theology prevalent in many American churches could also allow modern Christians to be led astray. "In normal times such a problem is bad enough," he said. "In times of social stress, it can be devastating. Behold Adolf Hitler -- defender of the church, upholder of morality, savior of a nation. Behold the consequences of Christian theological negligence."

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