

Associated Baptist Press

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March 13, 1996

**SOUTHERN BAPTIST HISTORICAL
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Historical Commission, SBC
Nashville, Tennessee

MAR 25 1996

(96-25)

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Evangelical author urges Baptists to transcend left/right labels

By Bob Allen

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- Evangelical author Tom Sine called for a radical "third-wave Christian citizenship" to correct flaws of both the right and left at a Baptist ethics conference March 11-12.

Sine, author of "Cease Fire: Searching for Sanity in America's Culture Wars," spoke at a "Leadership Through the Culture Wars" conference sponsored by the Baptist Center for Ethics. About 155 people from 13 states attended the regional conference, held March 11-12 at Immanuel Baptist Church in Nashville, Tenn.

Sine said churches in America are being torn apart by polarization between liberals and conservatives.

"Many people, mainline Protestants, Catholics and Evangelicals, are looking for a new place to stand," Sine said. "They are not happy with the polarities of the right and left."

Sine offered "not a middle position between right and left" but "a radical biblical alternative" to both positions.

"My contention is neither side takes Scripture seriously," Sine said.

The Religious Right takes the Bible "literally," Sine said, but doesn't bring it to bear on public policy issues such as poverty and injustice.

Churches on the left, meanwhile, have their identity tied up in being "social progressives," even if it means ignoring moral teachings of Scripture, he said.

"Many of our understandings of discipleship, missions and social responsibility simply don't square with the Bible," he said.

Sine contended that the greatest threat to Christianity is not "secular humanism," as Francis Schaeffer argued, but an "enlightened secularism" that defines "a better future largely in economic terms."

The "real secularism" threatening American Christians consists of "materialism, individualism and consumerism," Sine said.

"We really have not done the work we need to do to set our folks free," Sine said. He cited "the outrageous busy-ness" that results in people being preoccupied with activities at the expense of time for Bible study and devotion.

"The enemy is not the liberal on one end or the Religious Right on the other," Sine said. "Pogo said it best, 'We have seen the enemy and he is us.'"

Sine called for a "third-wave Christian citizenship" to transcend debate between the left and right.

"We're using a two-legged milk stool," Sine said, by emphasizing a faith that focuses on "getting our hearts right with God" and "getting our moral lives cleaned up."

"God wants to define our cultural values, too," he said.

Sine suggested that individuals and families write "mission statements" that "challenge people to whole-life discipleship and whole-life stewardship."

He also challenged tithing as a standard for stewardship, citing a growing consensus among biblical scholars that "there's no basis in the New Testament for 10 percent stewardship."

He suggested "calling our people not out of guilt but out of opportunity."

Sine called for a "reorganization of how we use our time and money" that includes spending less on one's self and more on others. "I'm convinced we could help a new generation create a way of life that is more festive and celebrative, where they put first things first, where Jesus' vocation is our vocation," he said.

Sine said Americans often compartmentalize religion by thinking about their faith only a few hours a week and not allowing it to make a difference in their daily lives.

"I don't think the first call of the gospel is to proclamation," Sine said. "I believe in evangelism, ... (but) I think the first call of the gospel is incarnation."

American Christians need "to flesh out something that has the character" of the Kingdom of God, Sine said. "We desperately need to rediscover the meaning of community."

"We are going to need some new metaphors," he said. "The church we need for the new millennium is not a building we go to once a week."

Sine suggested beginning "cooperative communities" as an alternative to suburban living. A starter home in Seattle, he said, costs an average of \$150,000. Financed over 30 years, the accumulated cost is \$500,000, he observed.

By contrast, homes can be built in a "six-plex" with common activity areas for about \$60,000, financed over five years.

Eventually, a husband and wife living there could afford to cut back to 20 hours of work per week, freeing up more time to spend with children and for ministry.

"We're going to have to think that radically," he said.

"The single-family detached lifestyle is the most expensive way to live," Sine said. "If we don't create a community where people start to care for one another, we don't have a future."

"We need to be the part of the community that stands against the status quo," Sine said. "We need to be a subversive community."

Sine said Christians "need to be leaven in society," but should not equate patriotism with doing the will of God.

"We need to realize we are called to work beyond making America great. The Bible makes clear that God's agenda is a transnational agenda."

"My first allegiance is not only to God, but to the international community of God. It's not the United States of America," he said. "The kind of 'America-first' thing doesn't work for me."

Christians need to avoid the polarities of right and left in public life and "work in a spirit of reconciliation," Sine said. He also said Christians "should not be afraid" of losing in the political sphere because "our trust isn't in a free market or left-wing politics; our trust is in God."

Sine urged Baptists to re-educate people in their churches who have been co-opted by the Religious Right. "Everybody assumes the Religious Right and Christian Coalition speak for all of us," he said, but polls say most born-again Christians disagree with those groups on many issues. "We have lost our voice," Sine said. "The Religious Right has educated our people."

Evangelicals need to "take back education" of their own constituencies, Sine said.

"Our people have been educated to the politically correct views of the Religious Right. We have done a lousy job of educating our constituency. We have let others do it for us."

By adopting "a new biblical vision that simply transcends those of the right and the left and the American dream," Sine said, "I think the people of God could be the people who help birth a new dream not only for America's future but for the future of a world as we enter the new millennium."

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Speakers at ethics conference urge leaders to confront issues

By Bob Allen

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- Speakers at an ethics conference in Nashville, Tenn., urged Baptist church leaders to confront and clarify thorny social issues for people polarized by political debate.

About 155 people from 13 states attended the regional conference sponsored by the Baptist Center for Ethics, titled "Leadership Through the Culture Wars."

Evangelical author Tom Sine called for a radical "third-wave Christian citizenship" to correct flaws of both the right and left at a Baptist ethics conference March 11-12.

Sine said neither the right nor left take Scripture seriously, Sine said. The greatest threat to Christianity is not "secular humanism," he added, but an "enlightened secularism" that defines "a better future largely in economic terms."

The "real secularism" threatening American Christians consists of "materialism, individualism and consumerism," Sine said.

"We're using a two-legged milk stool," Sine said, by emphasizing a faith that focuses on "getting our hearts right with God" and "getting our moral lives cleaned up."

"God wants to define our cultural values, too," he said.

Marv Knox, associate editor of the Baptist Standard, tracked "From Carter to Clinton," 20 years of Baptist involvement in politics.

In the 1970s, Knox said, progressives were more likely to be involved in politics than conservatives, who considered their faith "a private realm." Now, that is reversed, and the more conservative a minister is, the more likely he is to be politically active.

Two reasons for that trend are that middle-class Americans have reacted conservatively to perceived emotional and physical threats and are appalled by what they regard as moral and spiritual decay, Knox said.

"Many conservative Christians think America is going to hell in a big yellow school bus driven by a Democratic lesbian gang member who grew up to become a school teacher who makes pornographic movies and rock music on the side," he said.

Oliver Thomas, co-author of "Finding Common Ground: A First Amendment Guide to Religion and Public Education," described his approach of getting people on both sides to sit down and talk about the emotional issue of religion in public schools.

Thomas outlined four "strategies for finding common ground." They are:

-- Agree on the ground rules. Thomas suggested all parties agree on statements such as religious liberty is an inalienable right, that all parties take responsibility for protecting all people's rights, that schools ought to be neutral and fair, that parents and not school bureaucrats have the right to make decisions about education and that when individuals disagree they will treat each other with respect.

-- Include all the stakeholders. Vocal minorities need to be included because "they're going to get in the conversation anyway," Thomas said. "I want them at the table, talking face to face."

"You have to pick somebody from each group that's represented in your community," he said. "We have to establish a climate where people feel like they're being listened to."

-- Work for comprehensive policies. "If you focus in on one issue, particularly one you're already divided over, you won't get off the ground," he said. "If you pick one hot-button issue, there will be a winner and a loser and your community will be worse off than when it began."

-- Be proactive. "Don't sit back and think, 'Hey, we've never had a problem in my community.' "

"If you haven't had a problem, you will," Thomas said. "But if you want to have a real problem, wait until someone files a lawsuit or someone leaks a front-page story to the newspaper."

Dellanna O'Brien, executive director of Woman's Missionary Union, said Christians should be guided by "a love ethic that causes us to see what God sees, go where God goes and do what God does."

"The challenge of the church today is to get the salt out of the salt shaker and into the world where it belongs," O'Brien said.

O'Brien described new WMU programs aimed at involving women in hands-on missions. One such program is "Project Help," an annual program aimed at increasing awareness on a selected social issue.

This year's emphasis is on AIDS. Churches and associations across the nation are sponsoring AIDS conferences using materials developed by WMU, she said. Also, funds are being collected to operate an AIDS hospice in Brazil.

"Primarily the purpose is to create awareness in social issues, to give women and men some handles on how to minister in those areas and then possibly continue in those ministries after the emphasis year," O'Brien said.

She also described a pilot WMU program setting up a "Christian women's job corps" in selected cities, designed to help women with "a hand up instead of a handout."

She said the project will be evaluated next year. After that, the WMU plans to produce materials and officially launch the program.

Nashville Tennessean columnist Dwight Lewis said "unrealized expectations on the part of blacks as well as whites" has widened the gap between the races.

The 20th century has seen gains for African-Americans including a 1954 Supreme Court ruling banning "separate but equal" public schools, Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech in 1963 and the 1964 Civil Rights Act and subsequent Voting Rights Act, Lewis said.

Despite those gains, America remains "two nations separated by the color of our skin," Lewis said.

He urged pastors and church leaders to take personal responsibility for leading people to reach out across racial lines.

"I think we've got to get to know each other," said Lewis, an African-American.

"If you think there's too much gap between the races, why not go home as church leaders and devise some programs that bring people together?" he asked.

Bill Purcell, majority leader in the Tennessee House of Representatives, urged Baptists to help their legislators by speaking up for children.

"I think we have the possibility for great good, but also the possibility for great failure in the political process as it relates to children in particular," said Purcell, a Democrat from Nashville.

Because loud partisan voices can gain the attention of legislators, misinformation is always a danger, said Purcell, a Methodist layman.

"We need your voice desperately in this debate," he said. "In a vacuum, a few voices are quite loud. A very few voices can be believed to be a groundswell."

If churches are not heard, "then the vacuum is filled by those voices you do not believe are right," he said.

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Coppenger decries 'ascent of lost man'

By Robert Dilday

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- Southern Baptists are abandoning the idea that people without a relationship to Jesus Christ are "bad," seminary president Mark Coppenger told a group of conservative Baptists in Virginia Feb. 27.

And that trend will have a debilitating effect on evangelism, said Coppenger, president of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Mo.

Speaking at an evangelism conference sponsored by Southern Baptist Conservatives of Virginia at Grove Avenue Baptist Church in Richmond, Coppenger drew on a series of verses in the third chapter of the Gospel of John to emphasize that people can be right with God only if they are "born again."

"Folks, I think ... as Southern Baptists we are losing the strong notion that lost people are bad people ... ," Coppenger warned. "I hear it again and again: 'Listen, he's a good man, he's a good husband, he just doesn't know Jesus.'"

"There's no such thing as a good man who doesn't know Jesus," he continued. "The person who is not saved is in fact the son of the devil, a rebel, hating the light. Now they can mask it and bad men do some good things, but at the core they are bad people."

Coppenger read from three Southern Baptist confessions of faith written between 1858 and 1963 to illustrate the trend, which he called "the ascent of lost man in Southern Baptist thinking."

The Abstract of Principles, written in the mid-19th century as the doctrinal statement of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., claims "man inherits a nature corrupt and wholly opposed to God and his law."

That, said Coppenger, describes "your unchurched, unsaved neighbor."

The first confession adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention, the Baptist Faith and Message of 1925, maintains man "inherits a nature corrupt and in bondage to sin."

"There is not quite this [idea of] fighting with God," said Coppenger, although the statement is still "pretty stout."

Finally, the Baptist Faith and Message Statement as revised in 1963 says "we inherit a nature and an environment inclined toward sin," a weaker statement, Coppenger said.

"Inclined? I'm inclined not to get out of bed in the morning, but that doesn't mean I don't get out of bed in the morning," he quipped.

This trend to downplay the "badness" of lost humanity is endangering evangelistic efforts, he warned.

"When we lose that (the concept that lost man is bad) then it doesn't make much sense to talk about the next thing -- we are damned," he said. "I mean if Phil is a good ol' boy and he just happens to have one little character flaw, and that is that he just hasn't quite linked up with Jesus, then why should he spend eternity in hell? But in fact if he is a rebel, if he is an enemy of the light, if he hates the light, if he's a child of the devil, then it makes sense to say, 'May not perish but have everlasting life.'"

"Because we have misstated the severity of man's evil -- understated it -- then we are having increasing trouble making sense of hell. And so you have annihilationism cropping up and universalism and de facto universalism, where you kind of say, 'God's loving, it'll all work out,' and we don't evangelize."

Using a plastic cup as a visual aid, Coppenger tore a hole in its bottom and asked, "Is this cup useless?"

Not really, he answered, since it might be used to hold pencils, as a foul line marker in a baseball game or to wedge inside a door to keep it open.

"The problem is it won't do what it's designed to do and that is to hold a drink of water. Lost men can do a lot of good things -- they can invent things and get the trains to run on time and irrigate this and that and give you directions when you're lost down at the Amoco station. But the problem is they are not fit to do what they were made to do and that is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.

"You would not think it out of line if I looked at this cup and said, 'Well ...,'" and he crushed the cup and tossed it aside. "That finally is where God comes. He says, 'This is not fit for what it was intended to be.' The difference between the cup and the man is that man wills it to be that way. The cup doesn't.

"Now if that sounds mean to you, I don't think it's any meaner than the Bible. I don't want to build my ministry on being nicer than Jesus."

Coppenger was one of six speakers at the Feb. 26-27 evangelism conference, the second for Southern Baptist Conservatives of Virginia, an organization opposed to what it calls a liberal theological trend in the Baptist General Association of Virginia.

Other speakers were Howard Baldwin, a Richmond evangelist; Henry Brandt, a "biblical psychologist" from Riviera Beach, Fla.; Wayne Dishman, pastor of Wynbrook Baptist Church in Glen Allen; Al Gilbert, pastor of Liberty Baptist Church in Hampton; and Don Smith of the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board.

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Conservative Virginia Baptists to consider executive director

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- Southern Baptist Conservatives of Virginia may elect its first full-time executive director at a called meeting March 21, according to the organization's March newsletter.

The executive committee of SBCV, a three-year-old organization opposed to what it calls a liberal theological drift in the Baptist General Association of Virginia, will nominate Norfolk, Va., minister Doyle Chauncey at the meeting, to be held at 7 p.m. at Grove Avenue Baptist Church in Richmond.

Chauncey is associate pastor at First Baptist Church of Norfolk.

"The calling of a full-time executive director is a giant step in the right direction for those who want to get on with the challenge of missions and evangelism through cooperation with the our Southern Baptist Convention," noted an article in the newsletter.

Richmond evangelist Howard Baldwin has been serving as interim executive director of SBCV.

Chauncey, who has been acting as SBCV treasurer on a volunteer basis, has been on the staff of the Norfolk church since 1990. His pastor there, Robert Reccord, currently chairs the task force overseeing a restructuring of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Chauncey was treasurer of the Baptist General Association of Virginia from 1978 to 1982 and has been pastor of New Covenant Baptist Church in Richmond and Liberty Baptist Church in Appomattox, Va.

At the called meeting, participants also will learn about a proposed missions partnership between SBCV and Romanian Baptists, to be developed through the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board, according to the newsletter. In addition, Fred Wolfe, pastor of Cottage Hill Baptist Church in Mobile, Ala., will bring an address.

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-- By Robert Dilday

Virginia Fellowship affiliate ponders shape of future ministry

By Robert Dilday

LYNCHBURG, Va. (ABP) -- Moderate Baptists pondered the shape of ministry in a rapidly changing world during the General Assembly of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Virginia, March 8-9.

About 500 people attended the third annual assembly at Rivermont Avenue Baptist Church in Lynchburg. The theme was "Until the End of the Age: Rediscovering the Great Commission in a World Without Borders."

In a keynote address, missiologist Keith Parks said global changes "demand a different kind of approach to missions," one that focuses on people instead of nations.

National identity is becoming "less and less significant," said Parks, global missions coordinator for the national Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

"People are not nearly as concerned about national identity as they are about ethnic identity," he maintained, citing conflict in the former Yugoslavia as an example.

"The more we live globally, the more we want local identity," he said.

Parks said ignoring national boundaries to minister to people groups instead of countries echoes the approach of the apostle Paul.

"Paul never addressed one of his letters to a city or a nation but to people," he said. "His focus was first of all on people. He had no sense of geography."

Seminary President Tom Graves said global changes are affecting the way Christians train ministers as well.

Graves, president of Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond (Va.), cited studies indicating a discrepancy between what churches say they need in professional ministers and what seminaries say they are producing.

"The future of mainstream Protestant life is in question ... ," he warned. "The influence of American denominations has been dramatically diminished."

To meet changing needs, seminaries must have a congregational focus, said Graves. "Seminaries must learn to focus on the life of the church instead of the academy."

That means more than adding to the curriculum classes on "practical ministry," which only further divide theory and practice.

"We need to integrate theory and practice," he maintained.

Seminaries also must involve more laypeople in the training of ministers, Graves said.

"Congregations should become part of the teaching team," he said, by bringing the laity into the supervision process of future ministers.

"Those who participate in the life of the church are the best experts to train seminarians," he said.

A new emphasis on spirituality also is required for seminaries in a changing world, he added.

"Spirituality can become the stackpole around which a seminary can be built," he said.

Finally, cross-cultural exposure is essential in training seminary students.

"The one place where the American church is growing is among ethnics," he said.

"Ministerial students for the church need to be trained to deal with our multicultural world ... There needs to be actual involvement" in that world, he said.

Also focusing on the future of theological education was Russell Dilday, distinguished professor of homiletics at Baylor University's Truett Theological Seminary.

Seminaries, he said, must:

- Reassert biblical truth claims.
- Be committed to first-rate scholarship.
- Focus on both the heart and the head.
- Maintain a balance between theory and practice.
- Emphasize biblical preaching.
- Develop a biblical/theological core for all degree programs.
- Provide an academic program for laypeople.
- Express a willingness to denominationalize.
- Enthusiastically employ technology in teaching.
- Have an appreciation for professional accreditation.

The need for seminaries to "denominationalize" does not mean "recreating ecclesiastical structures that have failed," he said.

"I am suggesting that seminaries must restore the theme of authentic Baptist identity in their curriculum. ... I think the expression of what Baptist distinctives mean is worth keeping."

James Baucom, pastor of Rivermont Avenue Baptist Church, assumed the post of moderator of the state CBF affiliate during the two-day meeting.

Gene Brymer, a member of Columbia Baptist Church in Falls Church, Va., was elected moderator-elect.

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CBF coordinator to teach at Richmond Seminary

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- The coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship will become a visiting professor at Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond after retiring this summer.

Cecil Sherman, who was the first director of the moderate Baptist group, will fill a new position funded by First Baptist Church of Asheville, N.C., a congregation where Sherman formerly was pastor.

Sherman, 67, will be First Baptist Church of Asheville, North Carolina, Visiting Professor at BTSR for at least three years beginning fall 1996, the seminary announced. He will teach three courses per year in such areas as the life and work of the pastor, preaching and worship and Baptist history.

Sherman also will assist in the seminary's new doctor of ministry program, to begin this summer, and will be available to the Asheville church for leading special studies and supply preaching.

"We are grateful to First Asheville for making possible this new model for cooperation between the congregation and the seminary," said Tom Graves, president of the moderate Baptist school in Richmond, Va.

Sherman became Fellowship coordinator in 1992. He will retire from that position June 30.

In addition to the Asheville church, he previously was pastor of churches in Georgia, North Carolina, New Jersey and Texas, among them Broadway Baptist Church in Fort Worth, Texas.

He holds a doctor of theology degree in preaching and a bachelor of divinity from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, as well as a master of theology in preaching from Princeton (N.J.) Theological Seminary.

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Baptist discusses children and television at White House

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A Baptist church child-care director joined children's advocates, lawmakers, parents and teachers at a March 4 White House briefing on ways to improve what children see on television.

Nancy Walker, director of the Child Development Center at Redland Baptist Church in Rockville, Md., attended the briefing conducted by First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton, Vice President Al Gore and Tipper Gore.

The White House held the meeting to thank advocates and lawmakers for helping to pass the telecommunications reform package and to report on President Clinton's recent meeting with media and entertainment leaders.

The media leaders assured Clinton that they would come up with a rating system for television programs.

Walker said after the meeting that "there was a sincere recognition for the people who work day-to-day for children."

The telecommunications reform included a provision requiring television manufacturers to place a device in sets that will enable parents to block programs they do not want their children to see.

Walker said she was glad there will be a tool for parents to be more active in what children watch. "It lets parents know that they have control. They already could, but now they have a tool."

Tipper Gore called for sufficient funds for public broadcasting so children's programs would not be "undermined," Walker recalled.

Walker said the time children spend in front of the television is her major concern. "I've seen a terrible neglect of children. There are other things you can do with a child." She said a child should not have a television as a "baby sitter."

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-- By Kenny Byrd

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