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Bible society spokesman denies 'feminist' agenda

By Mark Wingfield

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. (ABP) -- Reports that the New International Version translation of the Bible will be available in the United States only with "gender-neutral" language are "out-and-out lies," according to a spokesman for the International Bible Society.

The Bible society, based in Colorado Springs, owns the rights to the NIV translation and has a contractual relationship with the Committee on Bible Translation, the translators and guardians of the text.

The NIV, a respected conservative translation, is the best-selling modern version of the Bible.

On March 29, World magazine published a story claiming the Committee on Bible Translation had voted to produce a "unisex" version of the NIV in the United States. Further, the magazine reported, this new version would become the only version of the NIV text available in the United States.

The magazine followed up with an April 19 story on reaction from Zondervan Publishing House and the International Bible Society, claiming no factual errors had been found in the earlier story but admitting the content of the story had been challenged.

The original World story was the basis for a front-page article by Paige Patterson, president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C., in the May issue of Jerry Falwell's National Liberty Journal. Falwell's newspaper is mailed free to thousands of pastors and religious leaders every month.

Patterson charged the NIV translators have been taken captive by a "feminist" agenda and are "monkeying with the word of the Lord."

Steve Johnson, director of communications for the International Bible Society, said his agency has been swamped with calls ever since. "We have found ourselves in damage control," he explained.

The Bible society has produced an eight-page package of information to refute the World magazine article.

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"There is information being propagated that is out and out lies and untruth," Johnson said. "It has no basis in fact."

The World magazine article "is filled with innuendo and sensationalism, containing unconscionable slander," said Eugene Rubingh, vice president for translations with the Bible society. "The very first paragraph states that if the Committee on Bible Translation has its way, people 'will not be able to buy a new copy of the version they trust.' The Committee on Bible Translation has made no such decision."

Both World magazine articles were written by Susan Olasky, who said the magazine is "confident of its stories."

"World doesn't see itself in conflict with the International Bible Society or Zondervan, but just thinks this is an issue that needs full airing," Olasky said.

World magazine is a conservative publication based in Asheville, N.C. Its editor, Marvin Olasky, advocates a style of journalism he calls "directed reporting" or "biblical objectivity." According to this philosophy, the reporter should determine what the Bible says about an issue and then write about that issue with a slant toward that biblical view.

Rubingh claims the World article on the NIV "tries to paint a conspiracy of (NIV translators) and radical feminism."

Bible society spokesman Johnson said the guardians of the NIV text have committed themselves to "vigorously resist the feminist agenda." All members of the Committee on Bible Translation are conservative, evangelical biblical scholars who have signed a statement of faith acknowledging the Bible "in its entirety is the word of God written, and is therefore inerrant in the autographs."

What apparently sparked the World magazine article and other reports of a forthcoming "unisex" NIV translation is a 1992 decision by the Committee on Bible Translation and the International Bible Society to review the NIV text "with gender-accuracy in mind," Johnson said.

"Gender-accurate" is a more appropriate term than "unisex," Rubingh explained, because the intent is not to remove all male pronouns but rather to more accurately translate words that in the biblical languages apply to both males and females.

Johnson added that gender references create more of a problem when translating the Bible into English than most other languages.

"The issue becomes particularly complex in English, as there is no singular term including men and women," he said. "Hence English sometimes employs the terms 'man' and 'him' when both genders are meant. ... In most languages, this problem does not even arise, since there are inclusive terms for both men and women, as the Hebrew and Greek intends."

Rubingh cited this example: In translating 1 Corinthians 11:28, the NIV currently reads, "A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup."

"A generation ago, we might have said, 'Obviously, Paul meant men and women,' but today we need to be more accurate and precise in order to convey that Paul meant all of us and not just men," Rubingh said. "So the new rendition would put it more clearly, 'We ought to examine ourselves before we eat.'"

The NIV translators have no intention of changing references that the biblical languages clearly convey in gender terms, Rubingh continued. "Where the masculine or feminine was intended, no change will occur."

So "Son of God" will never become "Child of God" and "fatherless" will not become "parentless," Rubingh said. God will still be a "he."

This is the basis of a "gender-accurate" NIV translation currently available in Britain, published by Hodder and Stoughton in 1996. The International Bible Society has not yet exercised its right to publish this translation in the United States.

However, Zondervan already is publishing in the U.S. an NIV translation for children and readers with limited English skills called the New International Reader's Version that was translated "gender-accurate right from the beginning," Johnson said.

But no plans have been made to publish the full NIV text in the United States in a "gender-accurate" translation, Johnson said. "There has been a lot of discussion on these issues, but as late as February 1997, Zondervan and International Bible Society decided that neither organization was ready to go ahead with a North American publication of a gender-accurate NIV edition."

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University, health-care system adopt 'cooperative relationship'

By Toby Druin

WACO, Texas (ABP) -- Baylor University regents voted May 8 to free Baylor Health Care System to be governed by its own all-Baptist board of trustees and urged that at least a fourth of them be elected by the Baptist General Convention of Texas or the university regents.

A news release issued jointly by the university and health-care system said the agreement "will ensure a continuing cooperative relationship between the two organizations." Both the university in Waco and the health-care system in Dallas are affiliated with the 2.5 million-member Baptist state convention.

Many Baptists in the state have been concerned that the Baylor Health Care System, valued at more than \$1 billion and built largely with Baptist funds, would lose its Baptist identity through newly negotiated alliances with other health-care providers.

The Baylor regents approved the agreement in a closed-door session. Officials did not disclose financial terms of the agreement but said the deal assures the university funding for:

- A new student-health center and support for its ongoing operations.
- Additional scholarships for students pursuing health-related professions.
- Support for the Baylor School of Nursing, which is housed at Baylor University Medical Center in Dallas.
- Continuation of the Institute for Biomedical Studies, which is operated jointly on the Waco campus by the medical center and the university.

The Baptist Standard reported the cost of those provisions will exceed \$50 million over the next 15 years.

The agreement includes dissolution rights should all or substantially all of the health-care system be sold. While officials did not release particulars of the dissolution agreement, the newspaper reported that if the system or major parts of it are sold, the majority of the proceeds would remain in Dallas dedicated for health-care purposes and a substantial percentage would be given to the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

In addition to the agreement, the university regents approved a resolution stating the university "is unequivocally committed to the Baptist heritage of the Baylor Health Care System and is therefore pleased that our new agreement assures that the board of the Baylor Health Care System will be an all-Baptist board."

The resolution, endorsed by university President Robert Sloan, also "strongly encourages the board of the health-care system ... to continue to align itself closely to Texas Baptists by legally assigning to either the Baptist General Convention of Texas or the board of Baylor University which is selected with input from the BGCT, the responsibility to elect at least 25 percent of its board of trustees."

The agreement ends speculation that began in January when the university regents were asked to approve a joint-operating agreement involving the health-care system, Harris Methodist Health Care System of Fort Worth and Presbyterian Hospital. Since the university regents appoint the health-care system trustees, legal counsel advised that they study all their options before approving the operating agreement. Among those options was sale of the system, which was valued in one estimate at \$1.2 billion.

Texas Baptist leaders hailed the settlement and its provision for an all-Baptist board of trustees for the health-care system and expressed confidence that the Baptist General Convention of Texas will have a major role in its selection.

"Although the process of selection of that board has yet to be determined by the health care system trustees, I am confident the BGCT will be involved in the election of board members in a process similar to that for other Texas Baptist health care systems," said William Pinson, BGCT executive director.

Trustees for all Texas institutions, except Baylor University, are elected by messengers to the annual Baptist General Convention of Texas. Baylor changed its charter in 1990 to permit the convention to elect only 25 percent of its board of regents.

Pinson noted that the university regents and President Sloan had "strongly expressed" their desire that the BGCT or the university elect all or part of the health-care system board and added, "The chief-executive officer, the chairman of the current board and other board members of the health-care system all have assured me and others that the BGCT will play a role in the selection and election of the Baylor Health Care System board.

Bob Campbell, pastor of Westbury Baptist Church in Houston and chairman of the BGCT executive board, said the agreement will enhance the ministry and work of both entities.

"Texas Baptists have demonstrated once again that a difference of opinion does not mean we cannot agree to serve our Lord effectively," Campbell said.

Baptists dreamed Baylor Medical Center into existence, Baptists paid for it and Baptists need to run it for the benefit of all people, said BGCT President Charles Wade, pastor of First Baptist Church in Arlington.

Health-care system President Boone Powell expressed satisfaction with the agreement, which he said "allows both organizations to focus on their mission -- education for the university and health care for the Baylor Health Care System."

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-- Marv Knox contributed to this story.

Villagers protect mission hospital from looting by Zairian soldiers

VANGA, Zaire (ABP) -- A band of villagers armed with clubs, rocks and machetes defended a mission hospital in Zaire against looting by government soldiers fleeing a rebel push across the country, according to three American Baptist missionary doctors there.

Missionary doctors Bill Clemmer, George Win and Mark Thompson remain in Vanga, Zaire, despite the civil war. According to American Baptist News Service, strong local resistance dissuaded soldiers from vandalizing the hospital.

"It was definitely [by] the hand of God that we were spared," the doctors said in an electronic-mail message received May 6 by the American Baptist International Ministries office. "Many other missions similar to ours were not so fortunate, and we can only say thank you to the Lord that for reasons unknown to us Vanga was spared."

The doctors said they feared that a battle in a nearby town would result in a wave of desperate government soldiers fleeing through Vanga and possibly destroying what is there. Another worry was that young people in Vanga might take advantage of the chaos and continue the pillage after the soldiers left.

Two months earlier, a group of young villagers burned a doctor's outhouse and threatened to loot the hospital, forcing the transfer of two Zairian doctors. When soldiers came to a hospital administrator's house demanding vehicles, however, those same young people confronted the heavily armed soldiers, threatening violence if they dared loot or cause any trouble. The soldiers, realizing their chances were slim, left on the boat on which they came.

The doctors said the incident "has brought about healing" from the skirmish experienced two months ago. "If the young people hadn't risen up and said 'No!' to the soldiers, a very terrible situation might have occurred, and the town of Vanga would have suffered heavy losses," the missionaries reported.

Earlier, American Baptists evacuated women missionaries and children as rebel troops opposing forces loyal to President Mobutu Sese Seko pushed across the country toward Zaire's capital city, Kinshasa.

As rebel troops moved within 50 miles of Kinshasa, an American Baptist missionary there described the situation. "The city of Kinshasa feels like a pregnant woman waiting for the child to be born," said missionary Miriam Noyes. "The child picks the time to come, and when it gets here, we'll see what it is."

Noyes said things were relatively calm but a rebel invasion felt imminent. Still, the Noyes family said they feel safe and chose to remain in Kinshasa.

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-- By ABP staff

Louisiana Baptist board backs peace proposals

ALEXANDRIA, La. (ABP) -- With a new state convention executive director and college president in place, the Louisiana Baptist Convention's executive board has asked for a moratorium on infighting which has divided the 587,000-member convention.

"We have all paid an enormous price for turning inward and turning on one another," said John Alley, executive board chair. He reported on a study which found that baptisms declined in churches involved in denominational struggles.

Alley outlined a series of proposals from a group that has been meeting to seek to end conflict centering on charges of liberalism at Louisiana College and politicization of state-convention elections. The group asked that:

-- Two advocacy groups, the moderate Friends of Louisiana College and the conservative Louisiana Baptists Speaking the Truth in Love, meet separately and then together to propose consensus candidates for the convention president, first vice president and second vice president.

-- Critics allow new Louisiana College President Rory Lee and new state convention Executive Director Dean Doster "time to do their job."

-- Partisans, for at least a year, "lay aside painful issues" and refrain from issuing public statements on controversies.

-- The Baptist state paper, the Baptist Message, "begin to help us lay aside our feud" and "promote those things among us that bring us together."

-- Both sides seek to promote Louisiana College and avoid negative statements about the school in Pineville.

-- Baptists in the state "set in motion a greater fellowship among all of us" by taking time to get to know one another personally.

The executive board endorsed the proposal. Later, leaders of the conservative group met and after "lively discussion ... voted by a large majority to participate in the proposed initiatives," according to a statement released by Leon Hyatt, a leader of Louisiana Baptists Speaking the Truth in Love.

Issues dividing Louisiana Baptists are important and need to be addressed, Alley said. "But in the process we found ourselves spending more time on the issues than we did on the harvest and blaming each other for a lot of things that were no one's fault and everybody's fault."

Meanwhile, in North Carolina, another state convention torn by strife between moderates and conservatives, a "committee of 20" met a second time to discuss "a shared vision in N.C. Baptist life in order to move forward together to fulfill our mission," according to news story in the May 10 issue of the Biblical Recorder.

The committee, appointed by state convention president Greg Mathis, a conservative, includes both moderates and conservatives. David Hughes, pastor of First Baptist Church in Winston-Salem, a moderate, was designated as the group's official spokesman.

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-- By ABP staff. Based on reporting by Lacy Thompson and R.G. Puckett.

Appeals court upholds Georgia 'reflection' law

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A Georgia law requiring public schools to open the day with a period of "quiet reflection" does not violate the constitutionally required separation of church and state, a federal appeals court has ruled.

Affirming a ruling by a lower court, the 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals rejected a challenge to the 1994 statute by a Gwinnett County teacher who refused to obey the law.

Brian Gillespie Bown was fired as a teacher at South Gwinnett High School after refusing to follow orders by school officials to comply with the law. Bown sued, charging the law violates the First Amendment's ban on establishment of religion.

The law requires teachers to begin each school day with "a brief period of quiet reflection for not more than 60 seconds." It states that the moment of silence "is not intended to be and shall not be conducted as a religious service" but is an opportunity for "silent reflection on the anticipated events of the day."

Rejecting Bown's claim, the appeals court applied a three-part test formulated by the U.S. Supreme Court to determine whether a government's actions establish religion.

The court concluded that the law has a secular purpose, that it neither advances nor inhibits religion and that it does not create an excessive governmental entanglement with religion.

Bown had argued that the law was infused with a religious purpose by a section stating that it does not "prevent student-initiated voluntary school prayers at schools or school-related events."

The appeals court disagreed, saying that section merely clarified that the law would not be used to prevent student-initiated prayers protected by the Constitution.

The Georgia act, the appeals court said, does not advance religion.

"All that students must do under the act is to remain silent for 60 seconds; they are not encouraged to pray or forced to remain silent while listening to others' prayers."

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'Religious indicators' unchanged in 50 years, Gallup poll says

By Marv Knox

PRINCETON, N.J. (ABP) -- The "good old days" may not have been that much different than today, according to a new Gallup poll.

A comparison of surveys from 1947 and 1997 indicates very little difference in America's "religious indicators," the Gallup organization's Princeton Religion Research Center reported in the latest issue of Emerging Trends newsletter.

In 1947, 95 percent of the American public said they believed in God, compared to 96 percent today, the study discovered.

Similarly, 73 percent of Americans said they believed in an afterlife in 1947. That measures up to 71 percent in 1997.

The 1947 and 1997 studies revealed an identical percentage of Americans -- 41 percent -- said they attend church "at least once a week" or "almost every week."

And 90 percent of Americans said they prayed in 1947, the identical percentage as today.

While the indicators show "a continuing high level of attachment to religion," both surveys pointed to the same question, Gallup pollsters said: Religion is broad, but is it deep?

The newsletter cited a 1947 report from Ladies Home Journal that sounds as if it were written in 1997:

"A profound gulf lies between America's avowed ethical standards and the observable realities of national life. What may be more alarming is the gap between what Americans think they do and what they do do.

"The extent of this national schizophrenia is made perfectly clear by the paradox that eight out of 10 Americans think that most of America's problems would be solved by absolute adherence to the law of love; and eight out of 10 Americans think they themselves obey the law of love.

"Thus, someone else is at fault. Here indeed is a revelation of man's final sin, which (Martin) Luther defined as his unwillingness to admit he is a sinner."

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