

Associated Baptist Press

Editor: Greg Warner
Associate Editor: Bob Allen
Phone: (904) 262-6626
Fax: (904) 262-7745

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Messengers debate Disney boycott call

By Bob Allen

DALLAS (ABP) -- It could be a small world after all -- a world without the Disney Channel, ESPN, ABC television and more than 200 other subsidiaries of Walt Disney Co. -- for those who heed the Southern Baptist Convention's call to boycott one of the world's largest media and entertainment companies.

As expected, messengers at the SBC annual meeting in Dallas voted to follow through with the Disney boycott threatened at last year's convention in New Orleans.

The resolution "on moral stewardship and the Disney Company" avoids the word "boycott" but asks the nearly 16 million Southern Baptists to "refrain from patronizing" Disney "and any of its related entities."

Other SBC resolutions adopted or awaiting action called attention to religious persecution and world hunger, supported religious displays in public buildings and opposed "gender-inclusive" language in Bible translations.

The Disney resolution accuses the family entertainment company of "increasingly promoting immoral ideologies such as homosexuality, infidelity and adultery." Among offenses cited by Disney critics are a policy offering health-insurance benefits to the domestic partners of homosexual employees, allowing the continuation of "Gay Days" at theme parks and the distribution of R-rated movies through Disney subsidiaries.

Most recently, the Disney-owned ABC network introduced television's first leading homosexual character in an April airing of "Ellen."

The resolution asks Southern Baptists to avoid spending on any Disney products, charging Disney has abandoned its commitment to family values.

In addition to Disney's three well-known theme parks, the company also owns the American Broadcasting Company -- which includes ABC television network, ESPN, A&E network more than 20 affiliated radio and TV stations, and a long list of trade journals, medical journals and software. Other entities include Disney-owned film companies such as Walt Disney Pictures, Touchstone Pictures, Miramax Films and The Disney Channel. The Disney conglomerate also includes vacation planning services, publishing companies and more than 20 general interest newspapers or magazines.

In addition to targeting Disney, the resolution also calls for extending the boycott to "any company that promotes immoral ideologies and practices, realizing that the Disney Company is not the only such provider."

Disney officials issued a brief response noting the company "creates more family entertainment of every kind than anyone else in the world."

"We plan to continue our leadership role and in fact we will increase production of family entertainment," the statement said.

In debate over the resolution, messenger Rick Markham of Snellville, Ga., opposed the boycott, equating Southern Baptists with 20th-century Pharisees. "This us-versus-them mentality is deadly," he said. "We are just reacting to an extreme while positioning ourselves at the other extreme."

Lisa Kinney, a messenger from Keene Terrace Baptist Church in Largo, Fla., drew applause for telling the crowd turning off their TVs for a while would be no great loss.

"Will the Southern Baptist boycott on Disney change Disney? I don't know," she said. "Will it change us? Yes. We will show we love Jesus more than our entertainment."

The convention rejected an amendment by Walter Price, a messenger from First Southern Baptist Church in Beaumont, Calif., which would have limited the boycott to one designated month to emphasize its impact.

Resolutions committee chairman John Sullivan spoke against the amendment, comparing it to an earlier suggestion for a more narrowly targeted boycott of theme parks and merchandise stores.

"I'm against this for the same reason I'm against a targeted boycott," said Sullivan, executive director of the Florida Baptist Convention. "If we say it is OK 11 months out of the year but not 12, we will seem hypocritical."

Wiley Drake, pastor of First Southern Baptist Church in Buena Park, Calif., who introduced last year's Disney resolution, pledged to press for boycotting other companies deemed sympathetic to homosexuality.

"Just because we can't boycott everything doesn't mean we should not boycott one," Drake said, adding that the potential negative image of the Southern Baptist Convention should not be a concern. "Jesus had a negative image when he kicked the merchants out of the temple."

After pressing for an SBC boycott against Disney in 1996, Drake said he continued to use his family pass to Disneyland the rest of the year.

"The pass ran through December, so Disney already had the money," he explained. "It gave me a chance to be on the inside at Disney."

Though denied a chance to speak during debate, former SBC president Jim Henry told reporters he strongly opposed the boycott. "The world will hear 'boycott' and [think] that we are against homosexuals," said Henry, pastor of First Baptist Church in Orlando, Fla. "We are against the practice of homosexuality, not against people."

Henry urged Southern Baptists to ignore the resolution, saying they are more likely to influence Disney through witnessing contacts than a boycott.

Other messengers interviewed came down on both sides of the issue.

"I'm in favor of writing a letter but not in favor of boycotting," said Tammy McCraw of Lynchburg, Va. "We can't be their conscience. Disney never claimed to be a Christian organization. I go into Disney stores all the time. They're going to make money regardless."

Rubye Click of Wichita, Kan., said she planned to observe the boycott. "I love Disney and I've always gone to it, but I would not go back. We have to take a stand."

Jim McCain, a pastor from Decatur, Ga., said he voted for the resolution but fears Southern Baptists may look foolish if they do not back up the words with action. "If we're not careful we'll become a convention of sayers and not doers. It will make us look like hypocrites, and Disney will get it in the press ... that we didn't do what we said."

Other resolutions passed by messengers Wednesday:

-- Urged Americans to refrain from international trade with nations which practice religious persecution.

-- Called on Southern Baptists to promote the denominational world-hunger drive through World Hunger Day on Oct. 12.

-- Asked Texas Gov. George W. Bush to call a special session for action on legislation aimed at protecting charities from a \$1 billion class-action lawsuit.

Other resolutions expected to be considered Thursday concern the public display of the Ten Commandments and oppose gender-neutral language Bibles, human cloning and corporate policies sympathetic to domestic partnerships.

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-- Jennifer Rogers contributed to this story.

Former SBC president against Disney boycott

DALLAS (ABP) -- Former Southern Baptist Convention President Jim Henry said the SBC's June 18 boycott on Walt Disney Co. sends the wrong message to the world, and he will not support it.

"The world will hear boycott and [think] that we are against homosexuals," Henry said to a horde of reporters on the convention floor Wednesday morning. "We are against the practice of homosexuality, not against people."

Henry, pastor of First Baptist Church in Orlando, Fla., stood in line to speak against the resolution but was not recognized to speak prior to a motion to cut off debate. Moments after messengers overwhelmingly adopted the statement, however, Henry told reporters the boycott will have a negative impact on Southern Baptist witness.

"This hurt us last year ... just the idea of a boycott," he said.

Hundreds of First Baptist Orlando's 10,000 members work for Disney, he said. Last year's SBC resolution, which threatened a Disney boycott this year, damaged the church's influence in the community, he said. "People would say to us, 'You're the Christians who don't want us in your church.'"

Henry acknowledged he is concerned about Disney policies that critics say support homosexuality but said a boycott is the wrong strategy. He also predicted most of the nation's 16 million Southern Baptists will not join the Disney boycott.

"We should not be removing ourselves from people. We should go to people. The greatest force in the world is the love of Jesus Christ," he said. "Our weapons are not carnal, they are spiritual. If we are going to bring Disney to its knees, we should get down on our knees first."

Henry said if he had been given a chance to speak during debate, he would have asked how long the boycott would last, who will call it off and under what conditions. He also said he is concerned with the inconsistency of targeting just one company without addressing how far it will go.

"We reach thousands for Christ [at First Baptist] through Disney employees -- are they supposed to quit their jobs? Our church does the Christmas story at Disney World every year -- are we supposed to stop that? We air our service on ABC -- are we supposed to get off?" Henry said, noting that he will not renege on the church's television contract that has existed for 25 years, even though ABC is owned by The Disney Company.

Henry added that if Southern Baptists were planning to travel to Disneyland or Disney World this summer, he would advise them to still make the trip. "I'd say come on and worship with us while you're here," he said. "Be courteous. Pray before you eat. Don't litter. Be a good witness."

Henry said he is concerned Southern Baptists are only known for what they are against rather than what they stand for.

"We could get so removed that we will not have an impact," Henry said.

--By ABP staff

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Convention preacher calls for Christian activism

By Bob Allen

DALLAS (ABP) -- Christians have aided and abetted America's decline by remaining on the sidelines of civic involvement, Richard Land told the Southern Baptist Convention June 18.

In the convention's keynote sermon, Land, president of the SBC Christian Life Commission, said America is on the brink of destruction.

"If America dies she will perish from self-inflicted wounds," he said.

Land cited statistics on divorce, child abuse, violence, pregnancy, abortion and teen suicide to contend that America has declined since 1960. Other problems such as pornography, rape, domestic abuse and abortion further indicate decline, he added.

Land said Christians have contributed to problems caused by a generation-and-a-half of "moral relativism" by remaining on the sidelines of civic involvement.

"It's our fault for not being willing to get involved and being part of the process," Land said.

Land said he grew up attending Baptist churches where folks often said, "We're Southern Baptists. We don't get involved in anything controversial. We just preach the gospel."

"Folks, that's an oxymoron," he retorted.

Jesus' command for Christians to be "salt and light" forbids non-involvement, he said. "Jesus intended for us to be controversial."

Land said Christians must fight for a voice in the public arena.

"There has been a conscious, concerted, clever attempt by the various ruling elites in this country ... to marginalize Christians and to drive them from involvement in the public policy of this nation and it must stop," he said.

"We must tell them we will no longer allow them to censor us, revile us and to keep us from our rightful place in the public square."

Land said a spiritual awakening is the nation's best hope.

"We must have revival," Land said. "America is too far gone for anything else to save us."

"We live, by the grace of God, in the greatest country that has ever been seen on Planet Earth. God has blessed us wonderfully," he said. "But, you know, he's often blessed us in spite of ourselves."

"Our salvation will never be in America but the cross of Jesus Christ. We must have a revival and it must be a revival that blossoms into an awakening and becomes a reformation," Land said.

While Baptists have a right and responsibility "to be involved in the civic process," Land said they should not look to government to solve spiritual problems.

"There is always a danger when we are in a crisis to turn to the government and try to make the government our ally and say, 'If we can just get the government to sponsor our religion we can bring about revival.'"

"That always has been and always will be a fatal bargain," he said. "When government sponsors religion the government thinks it owns it."

"We don't want the government to sponsor religion. We want the government to quit suppressing our right to be heard. We want the government to provide a level playing field, then get off the field."

Land said Christianity can hold its own in the public square against competing viewpoints. "I never saw Elijah back away from a confrontation with the prophets of Baal. He just whipped them good," he said.

Land disputed the argument that Christians should distance themselves from politics because of the separation of church and state.

"When we preach the gospel and God blesses it and peoples' hearts and minds have been changed, then they as citizens have the right to come into the public arena and say, 'This is wrong and we want it stopped.'

"That's not called a theocracy. That's called the democratic process."

"Ask not what your country can do for God," Land said. "Ask what God can do for your country. The answer, of course, is everything."

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Please substitute this story for the June 17 story "African-Americans 'lose' in restructuring, leaders say." This story corrects minor errors in that story and also includes new information plus information from an earlier ABP story quoting Emmanuel McCall.

African-Americans question their place in new SBC

By Mark Wingfield

DALLAS (ABP) -- African-Americans in the Southern Baptist Convention have "lost" in the process of denominational restructuring, some former denominational employees expressed at the African-American Fellowship gathering June 16 in Dallas.

"We have some very serious consternations in this restructuring," Dennis Mitchell, former consultant in the black church extension division of the Home Mission Board, said in an interview at the meeting. "African-Americans have lost in this. We have moved backward."

"The fact that we were not included in the process just underscores the fact that there is still work to be done," he added.

Mitchell, now executive administrator at Greenforest Unity Baptist Church in Decatur, Ga., said the loss in number of positions related to African-American work at the new North American Mission Board compared to the old Home Mission Board presents serious questions for the future role of African-Americans in the SBC.

Concerns about the future relation of SBC agencies, particularly NAMB, to African-Americans were expressed during a business session of the African-American Fellowship. Officers of the organization said more intense debate on this issue will occur during an Oct. 1-3 meeting in New York City.

The concerns raised during the African-American Fellowship came on the heels of critical comments by the former longtime director of black-church extension at the HMB. In a June 7 speech to the Southern Baptist Historical Society, Emmanuel McCall departed from a prepared text to criticize the makeup of NAMB.

"I make a very painful statement," McCall said. "The reorganization ... hints to a lack of concern and interest for ethnic and black presence in the SBC."

McCall, who left the HMB in 1993 to become pastor of Christian Fellowship Baptist Church in College Park, Ga., said he recently was with a group of Hispanics who are raising the question of whether they should form their own convention in light of the new SBC structure. "It remains to be seen what will happen," he said.

The HMB structure included specific units related to African-American churches and ethnic churches. Both the black-church and language-church extension divisions were dismantled in the merger that created NAMB.

According to information distributed at the African-American Fellowship, four employees from the HMB's black-church extension division will not have jobs with NAMB: Mitchell, Willie McPherson, Michael Cox and Michael Thurmond.

According to this handout, Herbert Brisbane, who has been the HMB's director of black-church evangelism, will become NAMB's multi-cultural consultant manager with responsibility for relating to all ethnic groups. He will

expand his responsibilities from 2,000 churches to 10,000 and from one language to more than 100. One associate will work with him.

Robert Wilson reportedly will become manager of the African-American unit of the new church-congregation implementation team, one of four ethnic-consultant positions within the board's church-planting unit.

NAMB will have one church-planting specialist for each of four ethnic identities -- Korean, Hispanic, Native-American and African-American.

McCall charged that isn't enough. "That far decimates the emphasis that has been historic in the SBC," he noted. "It means that there is no ... intentional development of churches" in ethnic areas.

Members of the task force that have created the NAMB structure have denied the repeated suggestions that African-American and language work will suffer in the new mission board. The new structure merely is different, they explain, and will involve every employee in some aspect of promoting missions among blacks and ethnics.

Separate units where ethnic and African-American missions are isolated are no longer needed, they suggest, adding they believe the new structure actually will elevate emphasis in these areas.

McCall said he doesn't buy that explanation. "Anybody who takes that position does not know what is going on either in American society or the SBC," he said.

Brisbane acknowledged that "the dust is still up in the air" on how these changes will affect African-Americans, and he added that he is "happy to have a job."

"I have not talked to any powers that be, but I understand their intent is to be more inclusive of African-Americans in all areas of the SBC," Brisbane added.

However, Mitchell noted that he is distressed over the way the implementation task force--the group responsible for designing the convention restructuring--approached its task. Mitchell believes the task force did not aggressively seek input from all constituents within the convention.

"It was a very pale, male group," Mitchell said. The 10-member task force included one Hispanic and one Anglo female.

Meanwhile, a parade through downtown Dallas under the banner of "Celebrating Ethnic Southern Baptists" preceded this year's SBC annual meeting. The parade and a corresponding rally were organized by the HMB's language church extension division.

An estimated 800 people representing at least 50 language groups met at First Baptist Church of Dallas to proclaim their solidarity and to thank the SBC for facilitating what organizer Russell Begaye called the largest denominational inclusion of ethnics in the world. Begaye directed the HMB language church extension division, but what position he may have with NAMB has not been announced.

"Because of us, Southern Baptists have become the most ethnically diverse denomination in the world," Begaye said. "We chose to be Southern Baptists."

High-profile SBC leaders spoke at the lively afternoon session which was punctuated by prayer and singing. Speakers included O.S. Hawkins, pastor of First Baptist Church of Dallas; Simon Tsoi, pastor of First Chinese Baptist Church in Phoenix, Ariz.; Paige Patterson, president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C.; Robert Reccord, the Virginia pastor who was expected to be elected NAMB president; Rudy Hernandez, a Texas evangelist who was the only ethnic serving on the implementation task force; and Morris Chapman, president of the SBC Executive Committee.