

Associated Baptist Press

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Controversy erupts over Pastors' Conference speaker

By Bob Allen

HOUSTON (ABP) -- A speaker at this summer's Southern Baptist Pastors' Conference has drawn a rare rebuke from denominational officials worried that churches might be influenced to support his independent ministry over official missions programs of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Both a state Baptist newspaper and trustees of Southern Baptists' International Mission Board have gone on record criticizing K.A. Paul, who described his evangelistic exploits in India June 15 at the Pastors' Conference, an unofficial gathering that precedes the annual Southern Baptist Convention.

In his sermon, the 33-year-old Paul described the challenge of reaching people in the "10/40 Window," the latitudes in the northern hemisphere outlining the world's least-evangelized nations.

In the weeks following, however, several SBC leaders exchanged a flurry of letters and phone calls questioning Paul's background and criticizing his selection for the Pastors' Conference program.

Worried that Paul's Pastors' Conference appearance would be taken by Southern Baptists as an endorsement, International Mission Board trustees passed a resolution July 31 saying that "based on the information available at this time" they "do not have confidence" in Paul's ministry.

Officials said Paul's Houston-based Gospel to the Unreached Millions organization differs with the SBC's International Mission Board on strategy and lacks the checks and balances of the 152-year-old agency in Richmond, Va., known until a recent SBC restructuring as the Foreign Mission Board.

Board chairman Bill Blanchard said the trustee resolution was intended to "alert our constituency" to "reservations" about Paul's ministry.

Sources say SBC leaders are divided over Paul. Some embrace him as the "Billy Graham of India." Others say he has deceived prominent pastors with exaggerated ministry claims.

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"He has swept this convention," said one Paul opponent who spoke on condition of anonymity."

In a front-page article in the Aug. 5 Indiana Baptist, editor John Yeats reported "several conservative leaders" had raised questions about the accuracy of ministry statistics used by Paul and the financial accountability of his organization.

Paul "seems to overstate or exaggerate the extent of his work in India," reported Yeats, who in addition to editing the newspaper is an SBC officer. Yeats was elected recording secretary of the convention in June.

But Steve Marcum, a Southern Baptist who recently went to work for Paul's evangelistic organization, accused denominational leaders of "a vicious attempt to discredit us."

"It's disheartening to see the denomination you've been a part of all your life lash out and attack an organization that is trying to reach out and do the same thing -- preach the gospel and see people saved," said Marcum, international director for Paul's Gospel to the Unreached Millions.

Paul's fund raising is apparently not monitored by any independent ministry group, but Marcum said the group is seeking such certification.

Conservative SBC leaders also raised questions about Paul's "theological framework," the newspaper said.

While Paul is a member at Second Baptist Church in Houston, his independent ministry works with non-Baptist groups. Some conservatives are troubled by his ties to charismatic and Pentecostal groups which hold views on speaking in tongues and other practices that many Baptists view as heretical.

Marcum flatly denied that Paul is a charismatic, though the evangelist routinely prays for the sick during his crusades. He described Paul's preaching as "a clear presentation of the gospel of Jesus Christ and thousands are being saved."

Convention leaders were also chagrined at reports that Paul had unsuccessfully sought support from the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, a much-maligned moderate group which SBC leaders say undermines loyalty to the denomination. Southern Baptist agencies are not allowed to accept gifts from the Atlanta-based Fellowship.

Other concerns centered on Paul's apparent opposition to the use of American missionaries in India, which contradicts the International Mission Board's basic missions philosophy.

In his Pastors' Conference sermon, Paul said native missionaries already know the language, culture and traditions of the Indian people and can be supported for 1 percent of the cost of an American missionary.

That philosophy runs counter to "time-tested strategies" of Southern Baptists' International Mission Board, Yeats said. Funds sent directly to national missionaries tend to have the effect of setting up churches dependent on American money, he said. In contrast, Southern Baptist missionaries are committed to "planting indigenous churches with indigenous resources," which in theory pays off in healthier congregations.

The International Mission Board resolution reiterated the board's "basic strategy" of an "incarnational witness" achieved by sending and supporting missionaries.

"The trustees of the International Mission Board commend to Southern Baptist churches the mission program of the International Mission Board as being faithful to the biblical principles of missions and accountable to the churches," the resolution said.

"We've contrasted the way he does missionary enterprises with our basic methodology. We find a disparity there. We just wanted to alert people to that disparity," said International Mission Board chairman Blanchard, pastor of First Baptist Church in Soddy Daisy, Tenn., a suburb of Chattanooga.

Paul also at the Pastors' Conference issued a thinly veiled appeal for funds for his organization, a violation of protocol.

Yeats pointed out that several complaints began as a reaction to Paul's invitation to speak issued by SBC Pastors' Conference president Ronnie Floyd.

"The inherent danger with invitations to spokesmen for independent ministries is in their zealotry for their work, some would be tempted to use the Pastors' Conference or other SBC-related meetings as a platform of promotion and solicitation," Yeats wrote. "It has been suggested that future Pastors' Conference and SBC-related speakers be given a written explanation of proper protocol."

Floyd, pastor of First Baptist Church in Springdale, Ark., was traveling and could not be reached for comment.

While many critics said they had not heard of Paul before the Pastors' Conference, some reported earlier complaints of aggressive promotion and manipulative fund raising.

Harvey Kneisel, a former missionary in India, said he first met Paul four years ago, when Kneisel was a staff member at First Baptist Church in Houston.

After Kneisel and his pastor refused to go to India with Paul or raise funds for his ministry, the evangelist went directly to key givers in the church and asked them for money, said Kneisel, now director of missions for Corpus Christi Baptist Association.

Kneisel said Paul described himself as "the Billy Graham of India." But when Kneisel asked Baptist contacts in India about him, none had heard of him.

"I couldn't understand -- the Billy Graham of India -- they not knowing anything about him," Kneisel said. Kneisel said he also asked for but never received an audit of Paul's finances.

Paul did not respond to letters written by SBC leaders with questions about his ministry and support.

Marcum, former pastor of Graceland Baptist Church in New Albany, Ind., and past president of the Indiana Baptist State Convention, said he went to work for Paul just three weeks ago after traveling overseas with the evangelist five times.

"I wouldn't leave a place I've been 34 years to come to an organization that's not credible," Marcum said.

Marcum said he believes the charges of exaggerated statistics come from the incredible response to Paul's India crusades. "When you say 500,000 people got saved, the first thing that comes to your mind is 'No way,'" Marcum said.

Marcum said he personally saw more than 52,000 respond to an evangelistic invitation on his first trip to India with Paul in March 1995. "It's one of the reasons I'm sitting here in Houston now instead of Indiana," he said.

But Kneisel said he is unswayed by such reports.

"All these people who tell you they are having a hundred thousand a night saved, I know that's a bunch of baloney," Kneisel said.

India's predominant religion, held by 80 percent of Indians, is Hinduism, which Kneisel said recognizes millions of gods.

"For them to plug into one more god is not a big deal," Kneisel said. "Until they renounce their 330 million other gods, they are not a convert."

Marcum said criticism like Kneisel's comes only from people who "have not been there."

Marcum said there are different opinions about effective strategies for international missions. If the International Mission Board had concerns about Paul's, however, trustees should have asked to sit down for a meeting before issuing a public criticism, he added.

"The Scripture says if you have fault with your brother, what do you do? You go to your brother. You don't lambast him publicly," Marcum said.

Blanchard responded that staff members at the International Mission Board had consulted with Marcum and that the public nature of Paul's Pastors' Conference address called for a public response.

Marcum said all funds solicited for Paul's ministry "are sent 100 percent to the mission field" and are audited there. He said the organization is in the process of seeking certification by the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability.

Marcum also said he was disappointed by the Indiana Baptist article. "For them to come out and do a front-page article, things must really be dull in Indiana," he said.

Marcum said "it's been a nightmare" for the organization since Paul spoke at the Pastors' Conference. "He would have been better off if he had not gotten the invitation."

This is not Paul's first brush with controversy. Critics have dogged his Gospel to the Unreached Millions through much of its 4-year history.

Some leaders of the 2.3 million-member Assemblies of God, America's largest Pentecostal denomination, are reportedly investigating the ministry.

Marcum described most of the charges circulating against Paul as innuendo. "The innuendos kill. Let's deal with the facts," he said.

Marcum said he is "greatly disillusioned" by the controversy. "The only person who wins in this is the Enemy, and he's having a heyday."

"Every day, as Dr. Paul says, thousands of people are dying and going to hell and we sit here bickering about missiology and whether we're credible or not," Marcum said.

Marcum volunteered one consolation: "If God is not bigger than all this, we're in the wrong business anyway."

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Longtime Stetson professor Earl Joiner dead at 73

ORLANDO, Fla. (ABP) -- Longtime Stetson University religion professor and Baptist historian Earl Joiner died Aug. 2 at a hospital in Orlando, Fla.

Joiner, 73, was professor of religion 37 years at the Baptist school in DeLand, Fla. He chaired Stetson's religion department 11 years before retiring in 1992, when he was named professor emeritus.

Stetson President Douglas Lee called Joiner "a landmark figure" in the university's history.

Joiner wrote several books, including "A History of Florida Baptists," which he recently revised. The updated edition is due out soon.

Joiner was a 1949 Stetson graduate who received both a master's degree and a doctorate from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

He was past curator and secretary-treasurer of the Florida Baptist Historical Society and a past president of the Southern Baptist Historical Society.

He was known internationally for his study of Protestant reaction to the Holocaust and worked each year in his community to plan a memorial service for Holocaust victims.

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-- By ABP staff

Judson College president announces retirement plans

ELGIN, Ill. (ABP) -- The fourth president of Judson College, an evangelical school in Elgin, Ill., is stepping down.

James Didier, 64, an administrator at the school for 30 years and president since 1992, recently told trustees he would like to retire in 1998, no later than the end of June.

Trustees announced a search for his successor. Nominations will be solicited this year until Sept. 15.

Judson is a liberal-arts college affiliated with the American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A. It is located on an 80-acre campus in suburban Chicago.

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-- By ABP staff

3 in 10 Americans report having 'remarkable healing'

PRINCETON, N.J. (ABP) -- Three in 10 Americans say they have had a "remarkable healing" related to a physical, emotional or psychological problem at some point in their life, according to a recent survey.

Most attributed their healing to a supernatural force, with 42 percent crediting either God, Jesus Christ or a higher power. Another 30 percent attributed miraculous healing to either their own prayers or prayer by others.

A total of 21 percent said they had been healed of a physical problem. Another 21 percent cited either an emotional or psychological problem.

Most who reported a healing (89 percent) said it made them more aware of their spiritual life, and 84 percent said it deepened their religious faith.

Only 5 percent of Americans said that a doctor had ever prayed with them when treating them for a serious health problem. Of those who had prayed with a doctor, 86 percent said the prayers helped them in recovering from their illness.

Of those who have never had a doctor pray with them, half said they would like for their doctor to do so; half said they would not.

The survey was conducted by The George H. Gallup International Institute in collaboration with Herbert Benson of Harvard University's Mind/Body Medical Institute. It was reported in the June 1997 issue of Emerging Trends, a monthly newsletter published by Gallup's Princeton Religion Research Center.

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-- By ABP staff

Mission of church mirrors mission of Jesus, Vestal says

By Marv Knox

AUSTIN, Texas (ABP) -- The mission of the church is the whole mission of Jesus Christ, Daniel Vestal told participants in the annual convocation of Texas Baptists Committed, Aug. 2 in Austin.

"What Jesus was and did is what we are supposed to be and do," said Vestal, head of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, a moderate organization of Southern Baptists based in Atlanta.

Missions is at the core of the Christian faith, Vestal said, quoting Quaker author and theologian Richard Foster.

"The church of Jesus Christ does not 'have' missions," Vestal stressed. "Missions is its life. ... Our mission is a continuation of the mission of Jesus."

Jesus' mission revolved around three focal points, he added. They are:

-- Proclamation and ministry.

Jesus "spoke the truth of kingdom reality," making plain in words the nature of God's plan for humanity, Vestal said. But Jesus also helped people who suffered.

"Our mission is a mission of both word and deed," Vestal insisted. He quoted St. Francis of Assisi, who said, "Preach the gospel, and if necessary, use words."

-- Power and healing.

"The ministry of Jesus encountered the power and reality of evil," Vestal said. "As Jesus confronted that evil, power came out of him" to defeat evil and heal the wounds it inflicted.

"Anyone who doesn't believe such demonic evil is present today is either naive or willfully ignorant," he added. He cited racism, terrorism and materialism as examples of corporate sin and abortion and the breakdown of the family as inflicted by "demonic darkness that is pervasive in our era."

-- Character transformation and the kingdom of God on earth.

The call to a relationship with Jesus "is radical and revolutionary," Vestal said. "And it is the mission of the church to produce people who live life this way -- so that God's kingdom will come on earth, as it is in heaven."

The church must fulfill its mission in three phases, he insisted.

First, the church must conduct its mission contextually, he said. "Every person in the world ought to be able to hear the gospel in terms they can understand and apply it in ways they live."

This ministry calls for putting the needs of people ahead of the aims of the church, he said.

Second, the church must reach people through relationships, he added. The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship's focus on ministering to people who have not heard the Christian gospel -- "has driven us back to the basics ... relationship," he said.

The gospel is best communicated when it's done one-on-one through ongoing relationships, he said. "You love them, become friends with them, give your life to them and leave the results to God."

Third, the church's mission must be incarnational, embodying in human form the love and message of Christ, he said.

"We become involved in people's lives," Vestal explained. "We become Jesus to some people. We're not seeking glory. We're not coercive.

"But in real flesh-and-blood ways, we administer grace to them."

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Work on forming spirit, Baptist Christians urged

By Marv Knox

AUSTIN, Texas (ABP) -- Baptists must pattern their hearts and lives after Christ's model if they expect to reach the world for him, Bill Brian told participants in Texas Baptists Committed's annual convocation.

Texas Baptists Committed, comprised of moderate and mainstream Texas Baptists, primarily is known for its political support of Baptist General Convention of Texas leadership against conservative opposition.

But the organization's annual meeting focused on spiritual preparation for Texas 2000, the state convention's campaign to present the message of Christ to every Texan by the year 2000.

"This convocation is not about politics and elections," said Brian, an attorney and member of First Baptist Church in Amarillo and co-chairman of Texas Baptists Committed. "It's about Texas 2000 and being shaped in the image of Christ."

Seven speakers explored the spiritual formation of Christians during the meeting, Aug. 1-2 in Austin.

"'Spirituality' has gone mainstream in America," said author and lecturer Jeanie Miley, a member of River Oaks Baptist Church in Houston. Many Americans have broadened the definition of "spirituality" almost beyond recognition, she said.

Still, Christians must participate in the quest for spiritual formation, Miley added. "We, too, need to look more closely at the care of our own souls. ... Our churches need to provide answers for the getting through the grunge of life."

"We must cultivate an inward journey," she advised. "Practice the presence of Christ."

Describing the "geography of spiritual formation," Bob Ellis noted God continually has used the patterns of "creation, calling, crisis and rest" to form the spiritual lives of God's people.

Each of those four events has provided occasion for spiritual growth in the lives of Jesus and his followers, said Ellis, professor at Hardin-Simmons University's Logsdon School of Theology in Abilene.

The Bible also shows that God's Holy Spirit works to replace chaos and death with order and life, he stressed. "Our lives revolve around poles of order or chaos, life or death. The Spirit desires to create order and life; we may choose order and life or chaos and death. Our response is essential."

A key response is to be aware of God's presence and to communicate with God through worship and prayer, he said. Another is to understand Christian identity and value in Christ.

Pondering these issues raises questions, Ellis acknowledged, adding, "Questioning can be a tool to open ourselves up where the Spirit can create order and life through creation, calling, crisis and rest."

Faith plays a huge role in spiritual formation, stressed George Mason, pastor of Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas.

"Spiritual formation begins with faith," Mason said. "Faith is God's gift to us before it is anything else. ... We do not discover God; God discovers us."

However, Christian conversation sometimes indicates otherwise, he added. "Sometimes it sounds as if we're self-made Christians. (But) faith never is our possession. It is always God giving us more. It is letting go so God can work on us. ...

"From God's calling to our following, it is all faith."

Spiritual formation extends its impact to various expressions of faith, such as worship, service and family life, speakers said.

"God knows ... how worship affects us," said Ken Massey, pastor of First Baptist Church in Greensboro, N.C. "We've been taught that form doesn't matter as long as substance is OK, but that's not true."

Churches have been tempted to mirror the secular culture in the forms of their worship services, he noted. He admitted he is not opposed to all forms of contemporary worship, which seek to blend elements of secular entertainment into worship. But he asked, "Instead of making the secular sacred, what if we make the sacred secular?"

"We must recapture ancient forms of worship, ones blessed by God," he said, affirming emphasis on baptism, the Lord's Supper, scripture reading and prayer.

Christian service to others enriches spiritual formation, claimed Doug Tipps, pastor of First Baptist Church in San Marcos.

"Service shapes us as spiritual people," he said. "It dialogues with who we are as spiritual beings. It says to spiritual formation: 'You have found yourself. You have found solidarity with all humanity.'"

"The work of service always leads to solidarity with the hurt and despair of mankind."

Focusing on spiritual formation and families, Bill Turner noted faith builds strong families.

"We Christians have a core love and loyalty for God through Christ ... that strengthens family love and loyalty," but families on their own do not necessarily strengthen faith, explained Turner, pastor of South Main Baptist Church in Houston.

"It is faith and not flesh which is our best foundation for family," he said. "The faith family knows the ultimate truth about ultimate values" and provides "the foundation for flesh family."

Spiritual formation that produces mature Christians discloses itself in "inward spiritual maturity and righteousness" not outward displays of religion, reported Howard Batson, pastor of First Baptist Church in Amarillo.

In Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, He talked about six situations -- murder, adultery, divorce, making false vows, vindictiveness and hatred of enemies, Batson said, noting Jesus admonished His followers to exceed the requirements of law and to live in the Spirit of God.

"Jesus is not so much concerned about ritual as about relationships," he stressed.

Yeltsin expected to seek alternative religion law

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Russian President Boris Yeltsin is expected to set up a committee to draft an alternative to a law he vetoed that would have curbed protection for religious minorities.

The vetoed measure would have placed sharp curbs on evangelicals, Catholics and other minority religious groups in Russia. In a seven-page veto message, Yeltsin said the law, passed overwhelmingly by the Russian Duma and supported by the Russian Orthodox Church, violated the Russian Constitution.

Chadwick Gore, communications director for Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, popularly known as the Helsinki Commission, said the Russian president would probably work on an alternative bill that falls "within the constitutional framework as Yeltsin sees it."

Gore said it would be hard for Yeltsin to veto such a popular proposal without offering an alternative.

While the Russian Constitution calls for the separation of church and state, Russians interpret religious freedom differently than Americans.

The constitution allows the government to view the Russian Orthodox Church as a state church or as "first among equals," Gore said, but does not allow the government to prohibit religious practices of other groups.

The vetoed law was not directed at Russia's established faiths, but newer, smaller religious groups would have faced registration requirements and would have had to wait up to 15 years to gain legal status allowing them to own property or have bank accounts.

The Russian proposal passed the Russian Duma on a vote of 300-8, raising concerns about a possible override of Yeltsin's veto.

A specialist on religious life in the former Soviet Union, however, predicted that Yeltsin's veto will likely stand.

Lawrence Uzzell, Moscow representative of the London-based Keston Institute, said that the Russian parliament is not as powerful as the U.S. Congress. "It is rare for the president to lose such fights," he said at a recent briefing sponsored by the Helsinki Commission.

Uzzell said even if the veto is overridden, the measure would go to Russia's constitutional court where the court is likely to side with Yeltsin if the president and parliament are split on the issue.

Uzzell also predicted, however, that Russians will have less religious freedom a year from now because Russian provinces are likely to pass local measures that will restrict the activities of foreign missionaries from western countries and of minority faiths.

In an earlier meeting of the Helsinki Commission, Uzzell said that more than one-fourth of Russia's provinces have passed laws which openly violate Russia's 1993 constitutional guarantee of religious freedom. He added that no provincial official had been punished by the Yeltsin administration.

Uzzell said registration systems are being put in place which would give provincial governments power to "regulate every aspect of religious life." He said the definition of "missionary" or "mission activity" is being applied to "virtually any committed believer of any serious Christian church, any church or religious organization which calls upon its members to proclaim its doctrines publicly."

"If these laws are enforced literally, all believers would be forced to register, to report in detail on their activities, and to pay a fee for what is supposed to be the constitutionally guaranteed right to proclaim one's religion in public," he said.

For example, a law in the Sverdlovsk province states that the Russian Orthodox Church and five other specifically named faiths are exempt from its requirements, but Baptists or Pentecostals are not, said Uzzell.

Chinese Christian leader blasts religious-freedom report

BEIJING (ABP) -- A Chinese Christian leader has criticized a United States government pledge to end persecution of Christians and push for religious freedom around the world.

Bishop K.H. Ting, honorary president of the China Christian Council, charged the U.S. government is becoming an international "protector of religion" and warned that U.S. intervention would harm relationships developed between China's official religious organizations and government.

According to Ecumenical News International, Ting wrote an article in a Chinese Christian newspaper saying he read "with deep regret and fear" a recent report by the U.S. State Department detailing Christian persecution around the world.

The State Department report said China's constitution guarantees freedom of religious belief, but the government restricts religious practice to government-authorized religious organizations and registered places of worship. Chinese officials have cracked down on unregistered Catholic and Protestant movements in the last three years, the report said.

Ting, 81, led the government-sanctioned China Christian Council, which represents 10 million Protestants, 15 years before retiring last year.

Ting acknowledged that religious-freedom problems remain in China. But he said the best way to resolve them is through the "Three-Self" movement which organizes Chinese Christianity on principles of self-government, self-support and self-propagation of the gospel.

Ting said U.S. intervention in the name of religious liberty would "only jeopardize what we have been doing ourselves" and would give Chinese Christians "the unenviable image of collaborating with the U.S. government."

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-- By ABP staff

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