

Associated Baptist Press

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Georgia Baptist executive committee declines to sever ties with Mercer

By Bob Allen and William Neal

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Having second thoughts after earlier voting Sept. 9 to sever ties with Mercer University for harboring a president labeled a heretic, the Georgia Baptist executive committee backed off to accept a compromise.

Armed with the report of a special study committee that labeled some of Mercer President Kirby Godsey's views heretical, the executive committee adopted a motion withdrawing convention support for the Macon-based school unless Godsey resigns.

After considering the impact of ending a 165-year-old relationship, however, the group later rescinded that vote and accepted recommendations of a separate committee proposing a compromise between the state convention and university.

Last November, the Georgia Baptist Convention passed a resolution charging Godsey, "has departed significantly from Baptist doctrine" with his 1996 book, "When We Talk About God ... Let's Be Honest."

Critics were upset with Godsey's rejection of the inerrancy of Scripture as well as questions the book raised regarding the divinity of Jesus, the atonement and the reality of hell.

In December, leaders of the 1.2 million-member state convention named two committees to study issues raised by Godsey's book.

One committee, chaired by Nelson Price, pastor of Roswell Street Baptist Church in Marietta, Ga., was formed to identify passages in the book that trouble conservatives, discuss those passages with Godsey and ask him to explain them in writing.

The committee's report and Godsey's written responses were published in the Sept. 4 issue of the Christian Index, the Georgia Baptist newspaper.

In addition, the report included opinions by the committee that Godsey's book and written answers "deviate from orthodoxy" and are "punctuated with heresy."

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"It is the committee's opinion that Dr. Godsey has failed his spiritual fiduciary responsibility as leader of Georgia Baptists' largest institution," according to the report.

The other committee, chaired by Frank Cox, an Atlanta pastor and the state convention's current president, studied the relationship between the Georgia Baptist Convention and Mercer University.

That report included recommendations which would give the state convention more input in selection of Mercer trustees and future presidents.

The report also calls for creation of a "joint liaison committee" to discuss points of contention between the two groups and would require that all future presidents affirm the "Baptist Faith and Message," a 1963 confessional statement of Baptist teachings.

Cox said the report was intended as a first step toward restoring trust between the state convention and the university. "We didn't get in this position overnight and the road to healing will be long," he said.

That road turned bumpy when Mike Everson, pastor of Second Baptist Church in Warner Robins, proposed an amendment to the Cox report ordering all convention funds to the university to cease unless Godsey resigns by Dec. 31.

The state convention gives Mercer about \$2.5 million annually. In return, the university provides scholarships for Georgia Baptist students and tuition discounts for children of ministers.

Everson's motion originally passed 53-42. But after an hour of emotional debate and a motion to reconsider, the amendment failed 43-57.

Robert White, the Georgia convention's executive director, defended the Cox report against charges it was "weak" and inadequate. "It is not a weak thing to build a relationship," White said. "It is always easier to cut it off than to build a relationship. I've always been a part of building relationships, not breaking them."

Meeting later Sept. 9, Mercer's executive committee unanimously affirmed confidence in Godsey and voted 5-4 to accept the proposed changes in the way the university relates to the state convention. To take effect, the recommendations must be ratified by the full board of trustees.

Mercer trustees have steadfastly defended Godsey, president of the school since 1979, against attacks and affirmed his right to write the book.

In condemning Godsey's theology, the Price committee acknowledged that many of his written responses to their questions were "attractive" but said they were inconsistent with what he had written earlier.

"The answers provided by Dr. Godsey represent a more cautious and more conservative response than the committee heard in the interview or read in the book," the committee said.

The committee concluded that Godsey "has masterfully double-spoken in many instances."

"After carefully listening to Dr. Godsey in the interview session and reviewing his written responses, the committee is regrettably compelled to conclude that on several core issues of our faith, Dr. Godsey's views deviate significantly from historic Baptist doctrine and are, in fact, considered heretical."

Price told reporters he did not question Godsey's Christian commitment. "It is possible for a Christian to have views that are heretical, but when a person has been accused of that, he should carefully listen," he said.

Godsey told reporters, "I do not believe I am a heretic."

-- Some information for this story was obtained from the Atlanta Journal Constitution and The Macon Telegraph.

Committee studying Godsey book focused on problem passages

By Bob Allen

ATLANTA (ABP) -- A committee investigating writings of Mercer University President Kirby Godsey focused on passages dealing with the authority of the Bible, the deity of Christ, substitutionary atonement, salvation and universalism.

In a report published in the Sept. 4 Christian Index, the special committee listed references it found "most disturbing" in Godsey's 1996 book, "When We Talk About God ... Let's Be Honest." The report also listed questions addressed by committee members to Godsey in an interview and in writing and Godsey's written response.

Exchanges included the following topics:

-- The Bible. In the book, Godsey commented that "simple identification of the Word of God with the Bible is a grave mistake" and "to ascribe written infallibility to the written words of the Bible is wrong."

In his response to the committee, Godsey said "infallible" and "inerrant" are words that can be used to affirm "trustworthiness" and "reliability" of Scripture, both of which he affirms. They also are used by technical terms used by theologians to describe a particular theory which Godsey said has several pitfalls.

"I do not affirm inerrancy, but I do affirm the trustworthiness and reliability of Scripture," Godsey said.

The committee criticized Godsey's reluctance to affirm inerrancy. "There are certainly far more problems in believing in the errancy of Scripture than there are in believing in the inerrancy of Scripture. To wit, if the Bible is errant, then you either have to say that God inspired error, or not all of the Bible is inspired or the Bible is inspired in spots."

-- The deity of Christ. Godsey wrote in the book, "Jesus is not God" and "the focus of the Christian faith should not be reconstructed into the worship of Jesus."

In explaining those passages, Godsey said he opposed "empty ritual" that calls for worship of Jesus rather than obeying the Bible's command to follow Jesus. He said he affirms the affirmation but intended to make the point that "Jesus is not all there is of God."

"God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Jesus is the Son, but there is more of God than the Son."

"Jesus as God is taught in Scripture," the committee responded. "No amount of context justifies the statement, 'Jesus is not God.'"

-- Jesus' death. In discussing the atonement, Godsey wrote that "Jesus does not come to pay off the heavy penalties for our sin" and "Jesus did not have to die."

Asked by the committee to elaborate on his views, Godsey affirmed: "The act of atonement is clearly a vital and important part of our faith. The same cannot be said for the various historical theories of the atonement. I have sought to underscore the point that we are not saved by theories. We are redeemed by God's presence in history. Theories, no matter how well stated, are human doctrines. We are not saved by doctrines. We are saved by God's grace. I do not regard the theory of substitutionary atonement to be a heresy. I regard it to be an inadequate and incomplete view of the atonement."

The committee said Godsey's view "denies the centrality of the cross and the redemptive work of Christ."

-- Salvation. On salvation, Godsey wrote: "Jesus did not come to tell us how to be saved. Jesus came to tell us that we are saved." Another passage said: "Accepting Jesus is not the basis of our salvation. Jesus came to say that we are saved."

Asked to explain, Godsey said: "The basis of our salvation is not something we have done. It is something God has done. Our asking for forgiveness is not the basis of God's forgiveness. God's grace is the basis of our asking for forgiveness. God is the basis of our salvation. Accepting Jesus and accepting God's presence in Jesus become the power of salvation in our lives."

The committee said Godsey's view of grace "implies an 'I'm OK, you're OK, it's OK' theology" and an "emasculated representation" of the gospel message.

-- Heaven and hell. Discussing final destiny, Godsey wrote: "Time is not a boundary. Death is not a boundary. Hell is not a boundary. Whenever a person chooses to accept God's forgiveness, the power of forgiveness becomes effective in his life. God's patient grace will finally win all persons to the new creation. God will never close the door."

In further explanation to the committee, Godsey responded that "the idea of an everlasting heaven and hell is not a view I have sought to refute."

The passage cited by the committee is one of three views described in the book and is not presented as his own view, he said. "I believe that a person's choice to live outside the boundaries of God's grace and love leads inevitably to death and hell," he said.

"My own hope and prayer is that God in God's ultimate power and wisdom will find a way to draw all persons to mercy," Godsey continued. "I do not know. I live by hope."

The committee accused Godsey of "leaning toward universalism." Godsey's statement that he lives by hope "is a wonderful sentiment" but "does not mesh with a thorough contextual analysis," the report said.

In his written response, Godsey said the committee's 30-plus questions were "interesting and relevant" but "do not provide an opportunity for me to convey the central affirmations of my faith as a Christian or as a Baptist."

He listed seven statements which he said represent "the bedrock of my understanding of our shared faith."

Godsey affirmed that Jesus Christ is Lord, that God is incarnate in Jesus, the Bible is God's word and his belief in sin and salvation by grace through faith. He also affirmed that "history and time are creations of God and that history moves from God to God. Over all history and time, above all churches and creeds, and reflecting upon the experience of sin and salvation, God is the only judge that matters."

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Indiana editor John Yeats elected Oklahoma editor

By Bob Allen

OKLAHOMA CITY (ABP) -- Indiana Baptist editor and Southern Baptist Convention officer John Yeats has been elected editor of the Baptist Messenger, the official newspaper of the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma.

Yeats, 47, currently serves as recording secretary of the SBC and an ex-officio member of the powerful SBC Executive Committee.

He was elected as eighth editor of the 85-year-old newspaper Sept. 9. He succeeds Glenn Brown, who retires after 10 years as editor Sept. 30.

Oklahoma Baptist Executive Director Anthony Jordan said Yeats brings skills as an administrator and businessman to the job, as well as a "pastor's heart."

"A lot of skills besides writing are necessary for this job," Jordan said. "I was impressed with his [Yeats'] caring heart, who he is as a person and his clear-headed thinking."

Unlike most editors, Yeats carries strong connections with the conservative faction that controls the 15.6 million-member SBC. SBC leaders often view Baptist papers with suspicion because they are owned by state conventions, which tend to be more moderate.

In editorials and news stories, Yeats has been a strong supporter of the SBC's rightward swing of recent years and he has gained access to the inner circle of the convention's conservative leadership.

Yeats is a long-time friend and protege of Tom Elliff, the conservative pastor of First Southern Baptist Church of Del City and current president of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Yeats began editing the Indiana Baptist in January 1996. He also held assignments for public relations and as a Christian-life consultant for the Indiana Baptist State Convention.

Before moving to Indiana, he edited the Plumline, a newsletter for Southern Baptists of Texas, a group sympathetic with SBC leaders which has opposed moderate leaders in the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

Later, the Plumline became a supplemental wraparound to the Indiana Baptist, with a reported circulation of 4,500 to Texas Southern Baptists.

When Yeats was presented as a candidate for the Indiana Baptist in 1995, the convention's executive director introduced him as "a very staunch conservative" who would not detract from the paper's good reputation among conservatives around the SBC.

Yeats said he would seek to edit the Oklahoma paper from a balanced perspective. "I try to stay as close to the middle as I can, and a shade to the right," he said.

"The paper should stand as a beacon of light giving knowledge," Yeats said. "That's going to be done, not just in copy, but behind the scenes on our knees."

Yeats said he would keep the publication strong by communicating the truth while presenting it in a kind fashion. When asked his criteria for running a story, Yeats said, "I would have to ask if the story will encourage, inform and help over the term."

Yeats will move from one of the smaller Baptist state papers -- the 7,000-circulation Indiana Baptist -- to the fifth-largest. With a weekly distribution of 94,000, the Baptist Messenger boasts the third-largest circulation of any newspaper in Oklahoma, behind only metropolitan daily papers in Tulsa and Oklahoma City.

Yeats, an Oklahoma native, has been a pastor of churches in Texas and Kansas. He is a graduate of Dallas Baptist University and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas.

Yeats and his wife, Sharon, have three sons.

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-- Dana Williamson contributed to this story.

CORRECTION: The Sept. 9 issue of Associated Baptist Press was numbered incorrectly. The issue should have been numbered 97-79.

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