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Baptist scholars debate Calvinism in Samford lecture

By Bob Allen

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (ABP) -- "If the gospel of Jesus Christ is so wonderful, so powerful, so beneficial to human beings ... why is it perhaps a majority of people do not accept it?"

That question frames one of the great debates among Protestants, said Baptist historian Bill Leonard. Calvinists -- named for the 16th century reformer John Calvin -- say it is because "they can't; they are totally depraved," he said. Arminians, on the other hand, subscribing to the free-will views of theologian Jacob Arminius, say it is because "they won't."

Leonard, founding dean of Wake Forest University Divinity School, offered an overview and critique of Calvinism in a lecture series titled "Great Ideas ... That Divide Churches," Oct. 14-16 at Samford University. Leonard gave lectures on women in ministry and religious liberty but was joined by three other Baptist scholars in a dialogue on Calvinism.

Leonard outlined the five points usually associated with Calvinism, using the popular "TULIP" acronym: total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace and perseverance of the saints.

Calvinists view those tenets in different ways, Leonard said. He termed one branch "popular" Calvinists. "This is what I call Southern Baptist Calvinists," Leonard said. "You talk like a Calvinist, but you act like an Arminian."

Leonard said limited atonement, the idea that Christ died only for the elect, "may be one of the most difficult doctrines of all," because it runs counter to Americans' strong belief in democracy.

Timothy George, dean of Samford's Beeson Divinity School, said "Calvinist" is often used as a pejorative term. "Some people use the word Calvinist the way some people use the term fundamentalist or liberal," he said.

While he said he would accept the label with certain qualifications, George said he prefers to be called a "Reformed Baptist," because it connotes both insights of the Protestant Reformation and Baptist distinctives.

George rejected "hyper-Calvinism," which emphasizes God's sovereignty to the point that it minimizes the need for repentance and faith in conversion. He said that view was important at times in Baptist history but is not

very active today. "I'm making bold to say that hyper-Calvinism is a heresy," George said. "It's almost as bad a heresy as Pelagianism, to which it is an overreaction."

[Pelagius was a Catholic monk in the 5th century. He rejected the concept of original sin, said all humans are capable to avoid sinning and denied that salvation comes by grace. His chief opponent was St. Augustine. Pelagianism was condemned by the Catholic Church in 431.]

George also said some of Calvinism's tenets get a bad rap, such as "irresistible" grace, which "makes it sound like we're a cog in a machine, a chip in the computer." George said he preferred to think of "overcoming" grace.

"Sure we resist grace," George said. "Everybody resists grace. ... The message of the gospel is that in spite of our resisting, God doesn't give up on us."

Fisher Humphreys, professor of divinity at the Beeson School, said Calvinism offers much to attract him, but he remains troubled by the view that God decreed humanity's fall in order to save the elect.

"It is very difficult for me to think that God has decided some people will be saved and some people will not be saved, without foreknowledge of how they might respond to the gospel," he said.

"If there is something God can do in a person's heart that guarantees a person will be saved, then I believe God will do that for all people," Humphreys said.

Ralph Wood, distinguished professor of religion at Samford, said the Bible teaches that salvation comes wholly as a gift from God. Even the power to accept salvation is prompted by God, he said.

The Bible also contains "choosing language" in passages which seem to emphasize free will, Wood said. "I think the language of total depravity is very helpful here," he said. "It doesn't mean we are utterly worthless, wretches, simply scum and worms. ... It means the extent of our depravity is total. It reaches to every aspect of our being. We have to be delivered by the sheer gift of God's grace."

Wood said grace "has to be understood paradoxically" as entailing both divine and human initiative.

"I cannot choose my parents," Wood said. "I can, however, act like a fool and pretend they are not my parents ... denying their parenthood."

The gospel, he continued, is: "God declaring in Jesus Christ, 'I am your father. You are my child.' Even our resistance and rejection of that good news is enabled by that good news."

The lecture series honors Dotson Nelson Jr., pastor emeritus of Mountain Brook Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala.

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Witnesses urge Senate panel to protect religion in the workplace

By Andrew Black

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Workers should not have to choose between their job and their faith, witnesses said at a hearing on a bill that would require greater accommodation of religion in the workplace.

The Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee heard testimony Oct. 21 on the Workplace Religious Freedom Act, which would require employers to "reasonably accommodate" workers' religious observance.

The bill's supporters say courts have watered down federal legislation enacted to prevent religious discrimination. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act required employers to accommodate religious observances unless doing so would result in "undue burden or hardship."

According to religious-liberty advocates, undue burden has been interpreted so broadly employers sometimes make only token attempts to accommodate a worker's faith. As a result, some employees have lost their jobs for refusing to work on religious holidays or wearing required religious clothing.

"It's incredible to believe in 1997 that we're talking about this," said Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass., who introduced the bill along with Sen. Dan Coats, R-Ind. "We have long understood our nation's connection to this fundamental value [religious freedom]."

Kerry criticized employers who "invoke an inflexibility and rigidity that burdens religious practice."

Two of Kerry's constituents, both Roman Catholics, told the panel they were fired from a racetrack after refusing to work on Christmas. Their case, still pending after five years, has been widely publicized in Massachusetts.

"I have asked myself how could this happen to a single soul in a nation founded on the principle of religious freedom," said Pat Reed, one of the fired workers. "This is not a problem that generally tends to affect professionals or the wealthy; this is a problem for the poor and middle class, hard-working, God-fearing taxpayers. We are the ones who lose in this game."

"No one should have to choose between their job and their need and desire to worship the very God who gave us this freedom," Reed told the committee.

Other witnesses included an Orthodox Jew and a Seventh-day Adventist who claimed their employers did not make reasonable efforts to accommodate requests to observe their Saturday Sabbath.

Also testifying was a Muslim woman whose religious head covering violated her company's new appearance policy. "Taking off that scarf would have been like taking off my shirt," she said.

Committee chairman Jim Jeffords, R-Vt., pledged to move the measure "expeditiously" through the committee.

Coats told a reporter he planned to ask Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, R-Miss., for swift Senate action in a meeting following the hearing.

The bill makes clear that employers must show that the undue burden caused by accommodating religion would result in "significant difficulty or expense." This definition is similar to language used in the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Coats said the bill balances legitimate concerns of employers with workers' religious freedom.

Richard Foltin, an attorney for the American Jewish Committee, said allowing workers to swap shifts for religious reasons could conflict with seniority rules and collective-bargaining agreements, but religious freedom should take priority.

"Reasonable accommodation is not absolute, but neutral work rules with no opportunity for accommodation are not reasonable," Foltin told the committee.

Other employment and religious-freedom legal specialists said the measure would not violate the Constitution's Establishment Clause, because its goal was to eliminate discrimination and not to promote religion.

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Growing gap between classes affects hunger, report says

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The gap between America's poor and rich is widening, according to a report released by a prominent anti-hunger advocacy group.

The United States has the highest income inequality of any industrialized nation, according to Bread for the World Institute's hunger report released Oct. 16.

The report says that from 1975 to 1995, the income share of America's poorest 20 percent fell from 4.4 percent to 3.7 percent, while that of the richest 20 rose from 43.2 percent to 48.7 percent. The richest 5 percent earned 21 percent of the nation's income in 1995, compared to 15.9 percent 20 years ago.

Income inequality is "a barrier to the solution" of hunger, said Marc Cohen, senior research associate at Bread for the World. He said low-income people often must choose between spending on food, shelter or health care, a dilemma he termed "heat or eat."

The report, "Hunger in a Global Economy: Hunger 1998," also says the U.S. holds higher rates of infant mortality and poverty than other industrialized countries.

Twenty-one wealthy countries have lower infant-mortality rates than the U.S., whose rate is twice the average of other industrial countries. "Infant deaths are closely linked to nutritional deficiencies among pregnant women. The African-American [infant mortality rate] is more than double the white rate," according to the report.

Bread for the World is a Christian citizen's movement against hunger. The group lobbies Congress on issues of importance to hungry people and claims 44,000 members and 2,500 affiliated churches. The report was released to coincide with World Food Day, established in 1979 by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations as a day to raise public awareness on issues of hunger.

"We're not taking full advantage of the opportunities the global economy provides to alleviate hunger and poverty," said David Beckmann, president of Bread for the World. "In many ways, the global economy has been a positive force for increasing living standards in many parts of the world," he said. "But governments, corporations and citizens have a responsibility to exercise their power to make the global economy less harsh for the less fortunate."

The group says that despite a booming economy, 841 million people in developing countries are chronically undernourished. The report states that 29 percent of U.S. children under age 12 (nearly 14 million) are hungry or at risk of hunger.

Earlier this year, Bread for the World endorsed the "Hunger Has A Cure Act" that would restore \$8 billion over five years of the nearly \$28 billion cut out of food programs in last year's welfare-reform package. A spokesman for Bread for the World said this year's budget agreement restores only \$1.5 billion.

In sharp contrast to government funds for food programs, the report notes that "in 1995, even without a superpower adversary, the United States still spent nearly \$37 billion -- half of its government-sponsored research budget -- on weapons development."

The report urges lawmakers to:

- Give priority to the needs of hungry and poor people when making economic decisions.
- Complement markets with government and civic action to ensure secure livelihoods for all.
- Coordinate policies among nations to foster full employment and other social goals.
- Promote international trade -- with safeguards for labor rights, the environment and food security.
- Encourage responsible investment through policies that are good for business, workers and consumers.

In a separate event, Children's Defense Fund President Marian Wright Edelman said the religious community must redouble its efforts to stand up for children's health and urge state leaders to take advantage of new federal funds to get health care to uninsured children.

She said a country that does not stand up for children cannot be strong. "God's going to call the nations together and divide them between the sheep and goats. ... It is our hope that this country will be a sheep."

Edelman spoke to reporters to promote the National Observance of Children's Sabbath, which 50,000 congregations participated in Oct. 17-19. The observance focused on children's health. The group is also celebrating its 25th anniversary.

Wake Forest hires staff for new divinity school

WINSTON-SALEM, N.C. (ABP) -- Wake Forest University has hired two administrators to raise funds and recruit students for its new divinity school, scheduled to open in 1999.

Officials at the Baptist school in Winston-Salem, N.C., recently announced the hiring of Wade Stokes Jr. as director of development and Scott Hudgins as director of student recruitment.

Stokes, a senior account representative for Graphic Packaging Corporation in Charlotte, will lead efforts to raise the final \$5 million of a \$15 million fund-raising goal for the divinity school.

Hudgins comes to his post from Emory University in Atlanta, where he directs Baptist studies at the Candler School of Theology. He is married to Mary Foskett, an assistant professor of religion at Wake Forest.

The divinity school will open with four to six faculty members and 30 to 40 students, said Bill Leonard, the school's dean, with an enrollment goal of 150 after three years.

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-- By ABP staff

Jimmy Allen to receive T.B. Maston ethics award

DALLAS (ABP) -- Former Southern Baptist Convention president and agency head Jimmy Allen has been named recipient of the T.B. Maston Christian Ethics Award.

The award is given every other year by the T.B. Maston Foundation to recognize lifetime achievements in Christian ethics and to honor the memory of Maston, a longtime professor at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Allen studied under Maston while earning a doctorate at the seminary in Fort Worth, Texas. Later, he became pastor of First Baptist Church in San Antonio. He was elected SBC president in 1977 and 1978. He also was president of the SBC Radio and Television Commission and founder of the agency's American Christian Television System (ACTS) network. Earlier, he was executive director of Texas Baptists' Christian Life Commission.

Allen has also worked as a visiting scholar at Vanderbilt University's Freedom Forum First Amendment Center and as a non-governmental observer at the United Nations.

The Maston Award will be presented at a Nov. 21 benefit dinner in Dallas. Will Campbell, a civil rights activist, award-winning author and Baptist preacher, will be the keynote speaker.

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-- By Ken Camp

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