

# Associated Baptist Press

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January 29, 1998

(98-5)

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## **Baptists should pray for Clinton, expect high character, Elliff says**

By Laurie Lattimore

HUNTSVILLE, Ala. (ABP) -- Southern Baptists should pray for President Bill Clinton, said Southern Baptist Convention president Tom Elliff, because "all Christians are commanded to pray for their leaders."

And while Elliff said he is reserving judgment on the current sex scandal rocking the White House, he said citizens have a right to expect good character from their president.

"God is far more concerned about character than us," said Elliff, pastor of First Southern Baptist Church in Del City, Okla. "I don't think the truth is known, but our leaders ought to be men of character."

Elliff said at the Alabama Baptist state evangelism conference in Huntsville he did not have a position on charges that Clinton had an affair with a White House intern and covered it up. Elliff said he would leave judgment of Clinton up to God but noted that forgiveness does not mean the absence of consequences for wrongdoing.

Although Clinton is a Southern Baptist, his presidency has seldom been a source of pride for conservative leaders of the nation's largest Protestant faith group.

In 1993, an effort was made to kick Clinton's home church out of the SBC over his policies on abortion and gays in the military. More recently, Elliff said, the president has continued to "distance" himself from Southern Baptists by vetoing a ban on partial-birth abortion and granting most-favored-nation trade status to China.

Elliff acknowledged that the unsuccessful effort at the SBC annual meeting in 1993 to unseat messengers from Immanuel Baptist Church in Little Rock, Ark., may have jaded the president's view of the convention. "I'm sure some strong signals were sent," Elliff said.

Clinton is a longtime member of the Little Rock congregation and attended there regularly when he was governor of Arkansas. He now attends Foundry United Methodist Church in Washington.

On another point in an interview with reporters at the Jan. 26-27 meeting, Elliff said he does not expect hostility over Southern Baptist plans to proselytize among Mormons at this summer's SBC annual meeting in Salt Lake City.

"Mormons have written the book on going door to door," Elliff said. "They are no strangers to one-on-one witnessing, so I don't think they will be upset."

Each year, the SBC encourages messengers to come early to the convention city to participate in a "Crossover" evangelistic event. Elliff said it would be hypocritical for Mormons, known for their aggressive evangelism, to feel intimidated by the influx of Southern Baptists.

"We're not going to Salt Lake just to share the gospel with Mormons," Elliff said. "We believe everybody needs to hear the gospel. Salt Lake City is a pioneer area, and I think this will be a really healthy thing."

On another topic, Elliff said last year's SBC boycott of the Walt Disney Co. is having an impact.

"If my mail is any indication, I'm getting about 1,000 to three letters in favor of the boycott," Elliff said.

Elliff said Disney chairman Michael Eisner's appearance on national television a few months ago proves Southern Baptists have gotten Disney's attention.

But the SBC president disputed Eisner's claim that the boycott was not denting Disney sales. "I don't think he has a good read on the issue, but I wouldn't expect him to," Elliff said.

Elliff, who was in the state at invitation of the Alabama Baptist State Convention, said he would not attend a meeting of the recently formed Southern Baptist Conservatives of Alabama.

Elliff sidestepped a question about the effect such conservative groups could have on the denomination in the future, particularly when those groups eventually evolve into a separate state convention. Conservatives have recently taken that step in Virginia and Texas.

Elliff affirmed the right of conservatives to part company from moderate-controlled state conventions. "I would never say to any group they cannot speak clearly and loudly on issues," he stated. "Southern Baptists are a people who feel there are certain standards by which we abide, principally those in the 'Baptist Faith and Message.' Some feel strongly about them; others not so strongly."

Elliff noted that there is no bylaw that would prevent the SBC from recognizing more than one convention in a state, and he claimed that as long as the SBC remains open to all Southern Baptists, no problems should arise.

"I think the record shows that we have encouraged nominations from every Southern Baptist," Elliff said. "There are certain gender and ethnic considerations, and often I've gone back and asked for more nominations to fill those out."

The president of the Baptist General Association of Virginia recently raised the fairness issue, noting that 75 percent of the state's trustees appointed to SBC leadership posts came from churches associated with the much-smaller Southern Baptist Conservatives of Virginia.

Elliff denied any attempt by the SBC to seek nominees from the conservative conventions over the established state conventions.

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## **Alabama court sidesteps ruling in Ten Commandments case**

By Laurie Lattimore

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (ABP) -- Both sides are claiming a semi-victory in the Alabama Supreme Court dismissal of the Ten Commandments case that has received nationwide attention, if not notoriety.

Alabama's high court threw out the case on a technicality Jan. 23, without addressing the constitutional issues it raised.

Instead, the court said Gov. Fob James and Attorney General Bill Pryor lacked legal grounds to seek a declaratory judgment on behalf of Etowah County Judge Roy Moore.

Despite the apparent side step by the Supreme Court, Moore said he considers the decision a green light to continue his practice of praying in court and to display his hand-carved Ten Commandments on the wall above his bench.

"The bottom line is that the Ten Commandments stay on display and prayers can continue in my courtroom," Moore said in a press conference. "The court could not have allowed the practice to continue if it did not believe it to be constitutional."

But Joel Sogol, the American Civil Liberties Union attorney who initiated the case against Judge Moore in 1993, noted that with the Supreme Court dismissal, the only ruling still standing on the issue is a decision by a trial court last February that Moore's practices are banned by the First Amendment.

"There is only one judge to rule on the constitutionality of the conduct [of Judge Moore], and that stands," Sogol said. "It may not be enforceable, but it stands until someone relitigates it because so far it is the only judicial precedent in the state."

After a judge threw out a federal suit filed by the ACLU in 1995, James and Pryor turned to the state's courts for final word on whether prayers and the Ten Commandments display are allowed in Alabama courtrooms.

A trial judge ruled last February that Moore's practices of praying before court and displaying the Ten Commandments violate the First Amendment's ban on establishing religion. That decision sparked a nationwide controversy, in which the Alabama governor claimed that, if necessary, he would use the National Guard to protect the display of the biblical laws. Pryor appealed the case to the Alabama Supreme Court.

"Despite the public attention it has attracted, the lawsuit out of which these proceedings have arisen ... was invoked merely to try disputes involved in another action," the high court declared.

Only one justice made a reference to the constitutional issue, in a concurring opinion which said Moore's conduct in court presents "no real threat" of a government establishment of religion.

Pryor said he was disappointed by the high-court ruling. "I had hoped the court would resolve this controversy once and for all so further lawsuits would be unnecessary," Pryor said Jan. 23.

After initial euphoria over the news that Moore will be allowed to continue prayers and hanging the Ten Commandments, the judge's supporters have begun to voice second thoughts about the decision and are already calling for a more definitive ruling.

"We will not let this cowardly decision by our Supreme Court go unchallenged or unnoticed," said Dean Young, president of the Christian Family Association in Alabama.

Sogol, however, said he believes a U.S. Supreme Court ruling on the issue is highly unlikely.

"The [state] Supreme Court has found a way not to rule on the issue, which leaves a bad taste in the mouth of everyone involved," he said. "But there is nothing here capable of going to the Supreme Court. We are back to square one with state trial court."

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## **High court refuses to hear two zoning disputes**

Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U.S. Supreme Court has refused to hear arguments that a California church's First Amendment rights are violated by a local ordinance requiring voter approval to rezone land on which it wants to build a new church and school.

A California appeals court previously rejected arguments that requiring voter approval for the rezoning would subject the church to a "popularity contest."

The 25 acres owned by First Assembly of God are outside the city limits of Ventura but within its planning area. The land is designated for agricultural purposes in the city's plan.

An ordinance approved by voters in 1995 bars rezoning of agricultural and open space lands until Dec. 31, 2030, unless the land is shown to be unsuitable for agriculture or the rezoning proposal is approved by city voters.

The ordinance was challenged by an association of residents and property owners in Ventura County. Two lower courts rejected the complaints before the nation's high court turned the case away Jan. 20.

The ordinance "calls for nothing other than a vote on a land-use designation," the state appeals court said. "It does not call for a vote on anyone's religious beliefs. It does not infringe in any respect on the free exercise of the church's religion."

The appeals court also dismissed arguments that the ordinance would jeopardize the church's tax-exempt status by forcing it to devote a "substantial" part of its activities in seeking voter approval for rezoning. The Internal Revenue Code bars certain nonprofit groups from devoting more than an insubstantial portion of their resources to influencing legislation.

"If the church believes the tax laws leave it at a disadvantage, its argument is with the tax laws, not [the ordinance]," the appeals court said.

In another zoning dispute, the Supreme Court turned away arguments that a Minneapolis ordinance regulating signs at adults-only businesses violates the First Amendment.

The Excalibur Group Inc., which operates an adult bookstore in downtown Minneapolis, challenged sign regulations that were previously upheld by the 8th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in 1991.

The challenged provisions require that all signs at adults-only businesses to be "flat wall signs" and limit the amount of space devoted to signs. The ordinance also bars the display of merchandise in window areas and requires that windows not be covered or made opaque.

The appeals court said the ordinance is "a constitutional regulation of the time, place and manner of speech" and that it left open "ample alternative avenues of communication."

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