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

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'Adultery' has no loopholes, say Bible scholars, ethicists

By Marv Knox

DALLAS (ABP) -- President Clinton's recent morals morass has put a new spin on the 7th Commandment: "You shall not commit adultery."

A former White House intern claims she had an affair with the president. Clinton denies it. In an attempt to reconcile those conflicting accounts, some have turned to semantics.

Webster's Dictionary defines "adultery" as "voluntary sexual intercourse" between a married person and someone who is not his or her spouse. Some have suggested that sexual acts other than intercourse between consenting adults, strictly speaking, are not adulterous.

But those seeking such a loophole will not find it in the Bible, according to ethicists, counselors and Bible scholars interviewed by Associated Baptist Press.

The Bible defines adultery as any "sexual relationship outside the boundaries of marriage," reported Gerald Keown, professor of Old Testament interpretation at Gardner-Webb University's School of Divinity in Boiling Springs, N.C.

Furthermore, the Bible does not make distinctions regarding various types of sexual acts, Keown said. The Bible does not mention the kind of sexual activity Monica Lewinsky claims she had with the president.

"The Bible never addresses that issue whatsoever. The Bible never speaks of it," Keown noted. "But by implication, it would be a difficult case to make that you could condone that biblically."

The attempt to navigate around a rigid definition of adultery is symptomatic of culture at-large, observed Phil Strickland, director of the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission.

"We go to great efforts to define the heart out of the Christian understanding of adultery," Strickland said. "Our culture has narrowed this to a point where much inappropriate sexual interaction is approved and is thought to not have serious consequences."

"Our casualness about infidelity is one of the major ingredients eating at the foundations of our culture. We are drowning in role models that routinely depict irresponsible sex as being OK."

And the recent focus on specific varieties of sexual activity misses the point of adultery entirely, two marriage and family counselors agreed.

"The issue is the violation of the marital agreement, and that's violated regardless of what you do" sexually, stressed Rebecca Land, a marriage and family therapist in private practice in Nashville, Tenn.

"I've had people say, 'We just kissed,' but that's a violation of the commandment," Land said. "I've worked with people who have had affairs of the heart -- strong feelings -- and that can wreck a marriage. We're talking about an emotional commitment to someone besides your spouse, and an affair of the heart breaks that commitment.

"That can be as hurtful as intercourse."

"Sometimes a relationship that does involve sex is not as threatening to a marriage as one that doesn't," added Mary Stedham, a marriage and family therapist affiliated with First Baptist Church in Abilene, Texas.

"If a person has an emotional connection to someone and has been unable or unwilling to achieve that kind of connection with their spouse, then their marriage is threatened," Stedham explained.

"When you get hung up on the letter of the law and look past the spirit of the law -- to respect your marriage, your marriage partner and yourself -- anything or any behavior that puts that in a disrespectful light" threatens the marriage, she said.

And that certainly is not limited to sex, Stedham insisted.

"People can commit 'adultery' toward work," she said. "It's what intrudes on your marriage and makes it less than it ought to be. It can be a person of the opposite sex, a relationship with your own child or any relationship that diminishes the energy and attention your marriage deserves. I've seen people for whom church involvement is the 'other woman.'"

Appropriate and inappropriate non-sexual relationships between men and women straddle a fuzzy line, said Bill Blackburn, pastor of Trinity Baptist Church in Kerrville, Texas, who earned a doctorate in theology and counseling and did post-doctoral work in biblical studies and medical ethics.

"It is hard to draw a line of when emotional adultery begins to happen," Blackburn said. "But the most basic issue is that you are giving something to another person that really only belongs in the marriage relationship. You are giving time and intimacy in conversation and often intimacy in teasing and joking that is not appropriate outside of the marriage."

"That is hard to define," he conceded. "But a common factor in this is when the other person begins to occupy your thoughts more and more, so you're thinking about them when you wake up in the morning. You think about when you're going to see them or try to work your schedule around seeing them."

Wayne Oates, Blackburn's doctoral professor, offered a simple illustration, Blackburn recalled. "Dr. Oates would say, 'If I find myself thinking about a female counsellee when I'm trying to decide what tie to wear, that's an early-warning sign.'"

"That kind of thing is an early-warning sign," Blackburn agreed. "People will say, 'We are just friends,' but I have come to the place to say, 'Yes, and it is a dangerous friendship.'"

"This is not to say there cannot be male/female friendships, because life is made richer by those friendships. But the boundaries have to be clear and clearly observed."

Unfortunately, many people -- Christians among them -- do not observe the boundaries of unfaithfulness, Land noted.

Land counsels people almost every day who are involved in adulterous relationships but who do not or will not see how inconsistent that is with their Christian faith, she said.

"The heart is deceitfully wicked," she explained. "We have the ability to deceive ourselves, because we don't want to think we're not nice."

People come into her office and talk in one moment about their Bible study groups or church involvement and in the next describe their sexual affairs, Land said. "Those things won't integrate. You can't reconcile those things."

But such denial is all too common, Stedham added. "Denial is high for all of us, whatever it is we're dealing with. We have a need to see ourselves in a justifiable position."

"I deal with this on a daily basis," she said. "Deacons, ministers, community leaders have these experiences. It doesn't make them bad people, but it does make their marriages less than they are designed to be."

And that gets at the very reason God forbade adultery in the first place, experts noted.

Adultery didn't make a list of things God is against just because God is arbitrary or doesn't want people to have fun, said Robert Parham, director of the Baptist Center for Ethics in Nashville.

Adultery is "distorted sexuality," Parham said. "It's distorted because it's dangerous and becomes destructive. It breaks the trust that has been established between two individuals. It becomes the controlling behavior which interferes with appropriate patterns of living."

The Bible teaches that "the marriage relationship is one of intimacy, where 'the two become one,' and that in itself precludes outside ventures," Keown noted. "That creates a major breach in the unity of the relationship. Instead of the ideal oneness, it is jeopardized if not destroyed."

"Sex is a unique language God gave us to communicate committed love," Strickland stressed. "When it is engaged outside the commitment of marriage, it demeans the gift God has given us. Ultimately, it becomes destructive to ourselves, to our relationships with others and to our relationship with God."

"When trust is broken, the damage undermines the whole of the relationship," Land added. "A lot of times, that's the primary issue."

"You have violated the bond; you have violated the trust. That's what hurts. The very nature of marriage is you put down the barriers and trust this person and let them know who you are. And you don't want to do that if you can't trust."

Despite the trauma of the current national discussion of adultery, perhaps the situation can be redemptive, Stedham said.

"The key is this: Will people change their behavior in any way as a result of the attention this has received," she said.

"God can bring good out of anything. Maybe he'll even squeeze some good out of this mess."

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Teens modeling sexual fidelity for parents, Richard Ross says

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- Many baby boomers' children are showing them the way toward sexual faithfulness, according to veteran youth minister Richard Ross.

"It is remarkable in our day and age to find a generation of teenagers more willing to choose a lifestyle of sexual fidelity than their parents," said Ross, founder of the True Love Waits sexual-abstinence campaign for teens.

"We know a fair number of parents who have been uncomfortable with their teenagers' True Love Waits' promise because the parents themselves have been unwilling to make a similar commitment to moral purity," noted Ross, a youth ministry consultant for the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board and youth minister at Tulip Grove Church in suburban Nashville, Tenn. "In my own youth group, I recently saw a teenager take a proactive role in convincing her own mother not to begin cohabiting with a male friend."

Usually, the role-modeling runs the other way, he said.

"Those of us who are calling teenagers to high standards of moral purity are very aware that the most negative and destructive pull toward promiscuity is a teenager's parents' own sexual fidelity," he explained. "Fortunately, there are some teenagers who are able to view their parents' moral failures with some degree of objectivity and to view that lifestyle as one the teenager does not have to repeat."

Statistics show teens who adopt that posture probably won't regret it, he added.

"A growing body of research suggests that teenagers who remain sexually abstinent until marriage are far more likely to build lifetime marriages without divorce and are far less likely to commit adultery while married," he said.

"The American myth of 'sowing one's wild oats' and then settling down to a healthy, long-term marriage is just that -- a myth.

More often, a teenager who is sexually promiscuous will become an adulterous adult."

"True Love Waits teenagers are taking a dramatic step toward building a lifetime of loving and committed marriages," he said.

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--By Marv Knox

Clinton calls nation strong, asks for education, health programs

By Kenny Byrd and Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- "The state of our union is strong," President Bill Clinton said in his annual State of the Union message Jan. 27.

Clinton told Congress that 14 million new jobs have been created, sending unemployment to its lowest level in 24 years. He boasted about low inflation numbers and a low crime rate.

"And the welfare rolls are at their lowest levels in 27 years," he said. "Our leadership in the world is unrivaled. Ladies and gentlemen, the state of our union is strong."

Clinton challenged lawmakers to strengthen the nation for the 21st century through education initiatives, child-care and health programs and race initiatives.

With an expected balanced budget four years ahead of schedule, Clinton said, "Save Social Security first." He said 100 percent of any surplus should be reserved "until we have taken all the necessary measures to strengthen the Social Security system for the 21st century."

Clinton spoke during a firestorm of allegations against him and his friend, Washington lawyer Vernon Jordan.

Allegations surfaced Jan. 21 that Clinton had an affair with a 21-year-old White House intern and encouraged her to lie about it. He has denied all the charges.

The allegations have stirred a media frenzy around the White House with reporters questioning White House officials about Clinton's personal life. He did not mention the allegations during his address.

During the hour-and-20-minute long speech, Clinton addressed Iraqi President Saddam Hussein and asked him to let United Nations weapons inspectors do their job. Hussein has protested the participation of U.S. weapons inspectors on the U.N. inspection team.

Administration officials say that the use of military force is near if Hussein refuses to comply with U.N. resolutions approved over the past few weeks.

"I know I speak for everyone in this chamber, Republicans and Democrats alike, when I say to Saddam Hussein, 'You cannot defy the will of the world.' And when I say to him: 'You have used weapons of mass destruction before. We are determined to deny you the capacity to use them again,'" Clinton said.

Clinton hailed the falling deficit numbers and said he would submit for 1999 the first balanced budget in 30 years. "Tonight I come before you to announce that the federal deficit -- once so incomprehensibly large that it had 11 zeroes -- will be, simply zero."

He called on lawmakers to raise the minimum wage, increase border patrol agents to control drug trafficking and raise funds for path-breaking scientific inquiries.

Among Clinton's top priorities remains education. He lauded lawmakers for expanding public school choice, opening new charter schools and increasing the number of Pell Grant scholarships. He also asked for an expansion of the Family and Medical Leave Act to cover 10 million more workers.

He asked Congress to make college as universal as high school in the 21st century. He proposed a reduction of class sizes in early grades by hiring 100,000 new teachers and upgrading or building 5,000 new schools. He said the new initiatives would reduce class sizes in the first three grades to an average of 18 students a class.

Health care was also high on the priority list. He urged for passage of the Consumer Bill of Rights, which would address patients' rights in managed care plans.

He reiterated a proposal unveiled weeks ago to allow some Americans between the ages of 55 and 65 to buy into the Medicare system. "It won't add a dime to the deficit, but the peace of mind it will provide will be priceless."

Clinton asked lawmakers to raise the price of cigarettes by up to \$1.50 a pack to bring teen smoking down.

Sounding themes from his claim two years ago that the "era of big government is over," Clinton said, "We have found a third way."

"We have moved past the sterile debate between those who say government is the enemy and those who say government is the answer," he said.

Delivering the Republican response to President Clinton's State of the Union address, Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott of Mississippi said GOP plans for tax reform and education renewal show the party's commitment to faith, family and freedom.

"One of the first things we'll tackle is real reform of the IRS," Lott said, claiming that Americans are "over-taxed, over-regulated and over-governed."

Lott said Republicans would "replace the tax code with a new system that is fair, consistent, easy to understand and less frightening to the American taxpayer -- a tax code that will end the fear and encourage savings and investment."

Unlike Clinton's proposal to escrow any budget surplus until the Social Security programs are put on solid financial footing, Lott said part of any surplus should be used to pay down the national debt and the rest returned to taxpayers.

While Clinton cited his support for public school choice, Lott touted the GOP's call for extending choice to private and parochial schools. Earlier this month, Lott and Sen. Paul Coverdell, R-Ga., unveiled a legislative proposal that would authorize a five-year program to provide education vouchers to low-income parents whose children attend an "unsafe school."

"We hope the president, this year, will finally see the wisdom of our proposal to give freedom of choice to low-income families whose children are stuck in dead-end, drug-ridden schools," Lott said.

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New Baptist seminary to start in Washington's Virginia suburbs

By Michael Clingenpeel

FALLS CHURCH, Va. (ABP) -- A group of Baptists in the suburbs of the nation's capital has announced it will launch a new seminary later this year, joining a wave of small, regional seminaries started by Baptists this decade.

Unlike most of the new seminaries, however, the new seminary will be church-based rather than linked to a university. It will offer ministerial training through networks involving faculty and student exchange programs, teleconferencing and internships with Baptist and non-denominational ministries located near the nation's capital.

The seminary, which eventually will offer three degree programs targeted to train vocational ministers, laity and internationals, was announced Jan. 29. Classes are scheduled to begin late this year or in early 1999 in a building owned by Columbia Baptist Church in Falls Church, Va., a suburb about six miles from Washington.

It will be named the John Leland Center for Theological Studies. Leland was a Virginia Baptist pastor whose battle for religious freedom in the 18th century led to the establishment of religious-liberty guarantees in the First Amendment to the United States Constitution.

Randall Everett, senior pastor at Columbia Baptist Church and one of about 50 individuals involved in the school's founding, says the group's goal is to bring Baptist theological education to the nation's capital.

"There is no area like the greater D.C area," he explained. "It is international and multicultural. The resources are here and the needs are here. We have Methodist, Catholic, Episcopal seminaries and a Muslim training center. Why don't we have a Baptist seminary in the nation's capital?"

Everett said the Leland Center will offer an "integrated" curriculum which will include classes in Bible and theology, spiritual disciplines and practical ministry.

"Saddleback and Willow Creek churches are training the church leaders of the 21st century," said Everett, "but they generally are trained in methodology but not in classical theological foundations. Our school will give them the foundations."

For most of this century Southern Baptist theological education has been centered in large seminaries scattered around the country. But the final quarter of this century has been an era of sweeping change.

In the 1970s the six Southern Baptist seminaries started setting up satellite centers in cities around the country to allow students to train for ministry without moving to one of the six central locations. Along with this decentralization of education, the six seminaries were targets for ideological change as the Southern Baptist Convention took a rightward shift.

Riding the pressure for decentralization and the dissatisfaction with an increasingly fundamentalist approach to theological study, Baptists began developing new schools in the 1990s. Moderate Baptists started a free-standing theological school, Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond, in 1991. Divinity schools or seminaries opened on the campuses of Baylor University, Samford University, Campbell University, Gardner-Webb University and Mercer University. Wake Forest Divinity School is slated to start classes next year. Baptist houses were established at non-Baptist seminaries like Duke Divinity School and Candler School of Theology at Emory University.

But until now the only models for church-based theological education were in fundamentalist churches such as Mid-America Seminary at Bellevue Baptist Church in Memphis and Criswell Studies Center sponsored by First Baptist Church in Dallas.

Though Columbia Baptist Church will host the Leland Center and has pledged \$70,000 to the school over the next three years, the project is not solely a ministry of the church. Funding for the seminary will come from churches in the Mount Vernon and Potomac Baptist associations, the District of Columbia Baptist Convention, scholarships available from the Baptist General Association of Virginia, individual contributions, grants and student tuition.

Everett said the seminary will be "lean" financially, with few resident faculty or buildings.

About 50 leaders, mostly from churches in northern Virginia, formed an investigative committee which planned for the Jan. 29 announcement of the new seminary. The investigative committee will create a board of directors, which will elect a president and faculty. A draft of a doctrinal statement is also being prepared by the committee. A brochure prepared by the committee states that the school will be accessible, biblical, diverse, evangelical, innovative and trinitarian.

It is the second seminary in Virginia started by Baptists. The first, BTSR, now has more than 200 students. Originally the founders of the Leland Center considered becoming a satellite campus for BTSR or Truett Seminary located at Baylor University in Waco, Texas.

"We moved away from the idea of being a satellite school because a big part of seminary is community, and community can't be achieved one day a week," said Everett. He said both BTSR and Truett were "helpful and supportive" to the new seminary effort in the D.C. area.

"We have been working with representatives from the John Leland Center," said BTSR president Tom Graves, "and are encouraged with plans drawn up for their program, and look forward to working with them as they offer work at the M.Div. level."

According to Graves, BTSR might be able to provide short-term courses on site in northern Virginia, send students to the D.C. area for missions immersion experiences, provide a place for Leland Center students to finish their degree requirements and possibly offer an exchange of professors.

"None of this is finalized," added Graves, "but I can get excited about the kind of course work that can be done up there. It really could be interesting."

Brad Creed, dean of Truett Seminary, spoke at a dinner where the Leland Center was formally announced.

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