

Associated Baptist Press

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U.S. House approves persecution measure

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U.S. House of Representatives approved a bill designed to curb religious persecution abroad on a 375-41 vote May 14.

But a competing proposal in the Senate, sponsored by Sen. Don Nickles, R-Okla., is expected to bring lawmakers to the bargaining table to draft a final version of the bill.

The House bill, the Freedom From Religious Persecution Act, is designed to curb religious persecution abroad by imposing automatic sanctions on countries which engage in persecution.

The bill is sponsored by Rep. Frank Wolf, R-Va., and Sen. Arlen Specter, R-Pa. It has undergone repeated alterations in several House committees and it was altered even further on the House floor.

Two House officials told Associated Baptist Press the final version of the bill will probably more closely resemble Nickles' International Religious Freedom Act.

President Clinton has said he could support a religious-persecution bill, but he opposes automatic sanctions in the Wolf-Specter legislation.

The Nickles bill would allow the president to choose from a list of several possible sanctions to use against countries engaged in persecution. It also uses a broader definition of religious persecution than the House bill.

The Wolf-Specter bill passed by the House would establish an office at the U.S. State Department to monitor religious persecution. The office's director would report on religious-persecution abuses and impose automatic sanctions on violating countries. Sanctions could range from the denial of U.S. foreign assistance and visas to prohibitions on certain exports.

Under an amendment accepted on the House floor, the bill would also create a commission on international religious persecution consisting of four members of Congress and the director of the new office.

The president could waive sanctions against the country only in the interest of national security or when sanctions would hurt and not promote the purpose of the bill.

The bill, originally introduced in 1997, underwent revisions before being reintroduced earlier this year.

House committees subsequently modified the bill further. Provisions that would have imposed import bans on Sudan were stripped from the bill earlier in May. Also removed from the bill were provisions making it simpler for those seeking asylum in the United States to prove they are victims of religious persecution.

While the changes have softened the bill, it still enjoys the support of groups including the Christian Legal Society, Christian Coalition, Family Research Council, Anti-Defamation League, B'nai B'rith, Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission and others.

Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's ERLC, said he was pleased the bill had cleared a "major hurdle." Land urged the Senate to pass the bill and criticized the Clinton administration for opposing the Wolf-Specter bill.

"This bill seeks to put the government of the United States where it ought to be -- solidly behind people who are being persecuted for conscience sake around the world," Land said. "That is where the vast majority of American people want our government to be, and it is where our beliefs and heritage demand that we be."

But other religious groups oppose the bill's use of automatic sanctions. They say the bill may do more harm than good to minority groups in other countries.

James Dunn, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee, said the bill passed by the House is an improvement over the original Wolf-Specter bill. "Each of our areas of concern expressed by our board last October have been seriously addressed," he said.

"We're hopeful that the final product will make significant improvements to reflect the real world of diplomacy," Dunn added.

Clinton recently told representatives of the National Association of Evangelicals he would oppose any bill that imposes automatic sanctions against countries engaged in persecution.

During debate, Rep. Lee Hamilton, D-Ind., said under the Wolf-Specter bill, every country in Southeast Asia, except Australia and New Zealand, could be sanctioned.

"We have heard from churches and evangelical groups with tens of thousands of missionaries. We have heard from people like Ned Graham, Billy Graham's son, who heads a major Christian mission in China," said Hamilton. "What do these religious leaders say? They do not like the bill. They worry that sanctions will produce a backlash against the persecuted religious community that they are trying to help."

Rep. Benjamin Gilman, R-N.Y., however, said the bill would help promote religious liberty. "While reaffirming our nation's commitment to the vital protection of religious rights, it also sends a long overdue signal to repressive governments that their repulsive behavior is no longer going to be overlooked," he said.

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SBC messengers will hear Dobson, vote on family amendment

By Mark Wingfield

SALT LAKE CITY (ABP) -- A proposal to amend the Southern Baptist Convention's doctrinal statement and an address by a prominent spokesman for the Religious Right will highlight next month's annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention.

The location of this year's meeting already is drawing attention, as the nation's largest Protestant body prepares to descend upon the home base of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Though Southern Baptists and Mormons share conservative political and theological views and both place a heavy emphasis on family values, the two groups embrace widely different theologies. Southern Baptists generally consider Mormonism a non-Christian cult.

Secular press representatives are headed to Salt Lake City in large numbers to witness the anticipated collision of cultures.

For their part, Southern Baptists will hit the city days before official meetings begin to engage in a range of evangelistic activities, including block parties, door-to-door witnessing, street ministry and other events.

The actual convention, June 9-11, is predicted to draw between 8,500 and 9,500 messengers, according to SBC Registration Secretary Lee Porter. Total attendance could reach more than 12,000 when guests and visitors to the meeting are added.

Inside the meeting hall, messengers will elect a new convention president, perhaps without opposition, and will consider an addition to the "Baptist Faith and Message" doctrinal statement defining a biblical view of family. They also will hear a variety of speakers, including James Dobson, founder of Focus on the Family and a formidable force in national politics this year.

Paige Patterson, president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C., is the only announced candidate for SBC president to date. Patterson, who in 1979 became a co-architect of the conservative takeover of SBC leadership, would become the first SBC employee to serve as convention president in 58 years.

If elected, Patterson has been quoted as saying he would work with churches and the North American Mission Board in an effort to baptize 500,000 people in the year 2000 and with the International Mission Board to develop a "comprehensive program" of worldwide evangelism and discipleship.

The proposed addition to the "Baptist Faith and Message" would be the first change to the doctrinal statement in 35 years.

The convention's closing message will be brought by Dobson, who has said his address will be political in nature. In recent months, Dobson has gained increasing national exposure for calling Republican leaders to task for not fulfilling the agenda of conservative Christians.

"Exalting the Unchanging Christ" is the theme of this year's annual meeting.

Other convention highlights include:

-- The convention sermon, to be delivered by James Merritt, senior pastor of First Baptist Church of Snellville, Ga., and chairman of the SBC Executive Committee. Merritt also is the person who announced Patterson's nomination for SBC president earlier this year.

-- A proposal to change the name of the Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention to LifeWay Christian Resources of the Southern Baptist Convention.

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Spiritual formation focus of CBF general assembly

HOUSTON (ABP) -- The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship will focus on spiritual formation at this year's general assembly, scheduled June 25-27 in Houston.

Conference planners predict the general assembly will be more a spiritual "experience" than a business meeting.

"Celebrate the Spirit," a theme based on Joel 2:23, kicks off a three-year initiative for the Atlanta-based Fellowship proposed by Coordinator Daniel Vestal. The series begins with a focus on spiritual formation in 1998-99, followed by emphases on "building community" in 1990-2000 and global missions in 2000-2001.

Richard Foster, author of "Celebration of Discipline" and other books on spiritual formation, will lead an extended session at this year's meeting. Other scheduled speakers include William Hendricks, director of Brite Divinity School's Baptist studies program at Texas Christian University; Bill Lawson, pastor of Wheeler

Avenue Baptist Church in Houston; Paul Duke, a professor at Mercer University's McAfee School of Theology; and Barbara Joiner, an author from Columbiana, Ala.

The meeting will also feature more than 110 special-interest workshops, a dozen simultaneous worship services and a commissioning of new CBF missionaries led by Keith Parks, the Fellowship's global missions coordinator.

A business session will include a "state of the Fellowship" report by Vestal, adoption of a budget and election of new leaders.

On-site programs will also be offered for children and youth.

The meeting will be held at Houston's Astrodome next to the Astrodome. It begins with workshops at 2 p.m. Thursday and will conclude with a communion service at 11:15 a.m. Saturday.

A "pre-assembly institute" beginning Wednesday night will focus on "Spiritual Formation in Christian Community." Speakers include Vestal and Roberta Bondi of Emory University's Candler School of Theology.

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-- By ABP staff

Retired Arkansas editor Erwin McDonald dies

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. (ABP) -- Erwin McDonald, retired editor of the Arkansas Baptist Newsmagazine, died of cancer May 1. He was 90.

McDonald, editor of the newspaper from 1957 until his retirement in 1972, was known for strong editorial stands against issues including gambling, racism and the Ku Klux Klan. "I sought to stir our readers to their own thinking on the issues of the day," he noted. "I saw the editorial page as my pulpit and claimed the same freedom of expression I had enjoyed as a pastor."

W.C. Fields, retired vice president of public relations for the Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee, once called McDonald "one of the most effective state editors Southern Baptists have ever had."

The Arkansas Baptist paper gave McDonald the honorary title of editor emeritus in 1974. After retiring from the Baptist paper, he worked as religion editor for the Arkansas Democrat.

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-- By ABP staff

Campolo blames faulty faith for decline in civil discourse

By Pat Cole

LEXINGTON, Ky. (ABP) -- Too many Christians perceive divine mandates from gods they've created in their own images, Tony Campolo told an audience in Lexington, Ky., May 7.

American Christians tend to project their traits and values on God and then pursue their political agendas with a religious zeal, said Campolo, an American Baptist minister and professor of sociology at Eastern College in St. Davids, Pa.

Such a narcissistic view of God is one reason for a decline of civil political discourse in the United States, he added.

"We do not simply differ with each other on political issues," he said in an address titled "Is Jesus a Democrat or Republican?" "We demonize each other. We contend that anybody who takes a position on an issue contrary to our own is somehow of Satan. Thus, the political civility that should mark this country has evaporated."

More than 500 people attended the lecture, sponsored by First Presbyterian Church of Lexington, at the University of Kentucky's Singletary Center for the Arts.

In his address, Campolo observed that "religion has become an instrument for polarization instead of a means of bringing us together and making us one in Christ Jesus."

Campolo said when he listens to white, evangelical Christians talk about Jesus he hears Jesus described as a "white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant Republican." Mainline Protestants have an opposite view, Campolo said. "They have made Jesus a Democrat."

Nevertheless, Campolo said, Christians from both the right and the left desire the same goals for America. Campolo said he has learned through a friendship with former Christian Coalition leader Ralph Reed that he and Reed share a similar vision.

Reed, he said, wants to see an end to poverty, racism, homophobia and sexism and desires a society where justice and equality prevail.

"When I see what he wants to happen in America, I realize that he and I are brothers in Christ," Campolo said. "We differ on how these things can be achieved. We differ on the role of government. He doesn't have as much confidence in government achieving good for society as maybe I do."

Yet Campolo said Christians from the political right and left agree on the biblical imperative that Christians should work toward building the kingdom of God on earth.

"We want to see America transformed into the kingdom of God," he said. "The fact that we cannot create the kingdom in its fullest does not deter us. We are committed to changing the world into the kind of world it ought to be, and that I say is a biblical theme."

Campolo labeled shortcomings in the agendas of both major political parties. Democrats, he said, have ignored individual responsibility and relied too much on government to solve problems. Yet Republicans have tended not to address evil systems that keep the poor from breaking free of poverty, he said.

"We have to be cognizant that Satan uses the system to oppress people and to pinch them," he said. "We are called to stand up against it."

Campolo advocated a "new kind of politics" where people come together in communities to solve their own problems. Campolo's church, a predominately African-American congregation in inner-city Philadelphia, has held community meetings to discuss neighborhood problems. They tackled such problems as drugs, poverty and the school drop out rate.

The meetings began with the ground rule that all solutions must come from within the neighborhood.

"When we started to talk in these terms, suddenly there were no political ideologies," Campolo said. "There was not a Republican or a Democratic answer to the druggie on the corner. It was a pragmatic answer."

Campolo said such an approach to community problem solving opened up many avenues for addressing issues. But he acknowledged that many problems cannot be solved totally on the local level.

The church must be at the center of efforts to strengthen communities, Campolo said. "It ought to be about the kind of politics that brings people together to serve and solve the problems that exist in their neighborhoods."

Campolo criticized policy makers who propose answers to social problems without seriously listening to people who are in need. "We've got to go and listen, and we've got to learn from those who are poor and oppressed."

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