

Associated Baptist Press

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

June 11, 1998

(98-44)

In this issue:

- Dobson says culture divided between those who believe God 'is' and 'isn't'
- Wrapup: SBC focuses on family, elects Patterson president
- Jerry Falwell attends SBC, this time as a messenger
- SBC resolutions describe 'true' gospel, demand moral character from leaders
- SBC narrowly rejects amendment urging 'discipline' by Clinton's church
- Top Wisconsin court upholds Milwaukee voucher program
- RFRA-like measure introduced in Congress
- Townspeople examine own souls following racial murder in Jasper

Dobson says culture divided between those who believe God 'is' and 'isn't'

By Mark Wingfield

SALT LAKE CITY (ABP) -- American culture is divided into two warring camps: those who believe God is and those who believe God isn't, James Dobson told the Southern Baptist Convention June 11.

Dobson, founder and president of Focus on the Family, received a warm welcome from a full house at Salt Lake City's Salt Palace convention center, where the SBC was holding its annual meeting. Messengers and guests greeted Dobson with several ovations throughout his hour-long speech.

"Society is split into two broad camps in a civil war of values," Dobson asserted.

The first is "those who say God is," he said. "And because he is there's a whole litany of transcendent truths you don't have to re-examine with every generation that comes along. You accept them because they come from the Creator. That's why we believe in the sanctity of life, the dangers of premarital sex, the Ten Commandments, in honesty, integrity."

On the other side are "those who have concluded that God isn't," he said. "If God does not exist, everything changes. You set your national policy on the basis of public-opinion polls. When life is inconvenient, you get rid of it. ... If God isn't, then homosexuality is the moral equivalent of heterosexuality and the family is defined any way you want to define it."

The speech was not the attack on the Republican Party Dobson was expected to deliver, the kind of speech he has been making in Washington and other points across the nation in recent months.

However, Dobson called Southern Baptists to action in the moral war he says is engulfing America, and which he has attempted in recent months to hold GOP leadership accountable for addressing.

He concluded by citing a passage from Revelation 21:8, which "lists those who will be in the lake of fire" at the day of judgment, he said. "You know what is listed first? ... It's the timid, those who lack courage."

Christians "have hidden for far too long behind the phrase 'We don't deal with those issues because we're not political,'" Dobson declared. "Folks, it is not political to kill babies, it is immoral to kill babies."

Christians must not let themselves be intimidated into thinking they cannot make a difference on political issues, he said. "Our critics have been very effective in intimidating us, in paralyzing us at this point and keeping us from using our influence in the culture. They have called us names: far right, extreme right, fundamentalists and worse."

But that shouldn't stop the Christian voice, Dobson said. "This is not a dictatorship. This is a representative form of government. We have every right to be heard, every right to influence, every right to participate. This is guaranteed to us by the Constitution."

It is a "crime" that half of evangelical Christians don't even register and vote, he said. "Churches must teach citizenship."

Dobson said he believes in the separation of church and state and that churches should not endorse candidates.

"Marry a candidate and you're likely to be widowed in four years," he quipped in a not-so-thinly disguised allusion to his frustration with Republican candidates who have been elected with help from the Religious Right only to forsake the Religious Right's agenda once in office.

As an example, he cited the actions of President Bill Clinton last November, when he addressed a group of homosexual activists and then endorsed a "revamping of [public school] curricula to include a pro-homosexual perspective and content."

"Would you believe there was not one governmental leader, not one Republican or Democrat, who even commented on that? And I heard very little from churches across the country.

"That's why I appreciated so much today your resolution on homosexuality," Dobson told the messengers. "On that issue we will be vilified. ... But we answer to a higher authority."

His reference was to a resolution adopted by messengers earlier that morning that called on Congress to nullify through legislation Clinton's recent executive order prohibiting discrimination in the federal workforce based on sexual orientation.

Dobson also applauded the SBC for its adoption of a new doctrinal statement on the family that included strong language about wives submitting to the leadership of their husbands. Messengers showed "courage in simply taking the Scripture at face value," he said. "If it says it, we believe it."

He further commended the SBC for a resolution adopted last year calling for a boycott of the Walt Disney Co.

Dobson centered on abortion, sexuality and a lack of moral leadership by the president as three recurring examples of a "postmodern perspective" that has "turned our value system upside down."

On abortion he gave this graphic illustration: "It is still a \$25,000 fine to kill an eagle's egg, and it's not even a misdemeanor to take a little baby who is six or seven or eight months along in gestation ... and deliver that baby about 80 percent of the way, all but the top of the head, and roll that baby over ... and cram scissors into the back of that little head. The entire body stiffens and convulses and a wound is opened and a tube is put in the head. The brain collapses and a dead baby is delivered. ... It's not the equivalent of a parking ticket to do that."

On Clinton's leadership, Dobson made an admitted "Freudian slip" when telling the Old Testament story of David and Bathsheba. In an attempt to explain how the prophet Nathan confronted the king with his sin, Dobson slipped and said: "Nathan came to see the president."

The crowd roared with laughter, and Dobson acknowledged his slip. But it was a fitting slip, he said.

"Nathan said, 'Thou art the man.' One of your resolutions this morning said, 'Thou art the man,' right?"

Dobson also lamented that "there has not been a single indictment of hard-core pornography since Bill Clinton came to office."

In addition to his comments on homosexuality, Dobson commented on the general state of sexuality in modern culture.

Because of the sexual revolution of the 1960s, he said, America is "a sick nation. You don't hear about it, but we are sick. Woodstock and nudity and all these things that came in the late '60s are destroying our kids. ... We're not only suffering from sexually transmitted diseases, we're suffering from the disease of sin."

Beyond being "salt and light" to the culture through political action, Dobson said the groundwork for restoring righteousness must be laid through evangelism.

"If people don't know Jesus, what good does it do for me to build strong families if they don't know the creator of families?"

He said evangelism with an undiluted gospel is more important than building churches and ministries with big numbers.

"My concern is the watering down of the gospel and eliminating references to sin and that which makes us uncomfortable," he said. "Much of what Jesus said is confrontational. He said, 'I didn't come to bring peace, but a sword.' There is confrontation in that."

Churches must emphasize both the positive and negative aspects of the Bible, Dobson said. "I hope we don't become so interested in producing consumers that we fail to produce disciples."

-30-

Wrapup:

SBC focuses on family, elects Patterson president

By Bob Allen

SALT LAKE CITY (ABP) -- Meeting near the headquarters of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Southern Baptists blasted Mormon theology and attempted to enhance Southern Baptists' image as a purveyor of family values, a strong emphasis of the LDS.

Citing threats to the definition of family, the SBC overwhelmingly voted to add an article on family to the 1963 "Baptist Faith and Message." The new article, which says wives should "submit graciously" to their husband's "servant leadership," captured intense attention in the mass media.

The convention closed with an hour-long address by James Dobson, founder and president of Focus on the Family. Dobson said American society is "split into two broad camps in a civil war of values," between those who believe God "is" and those who believe God "isn't."

"If God does not exist, everything changes," Dobson said. "You set your national policy on the basis of public-opinion polls. When life is inconvenient, you get rid of it. ... If God isn't, then homosexuality is the moral equivalent of heterosexuality and the family is defined any way you want to define it."

Other highlights of the June 9-11 convention in Salt Lake City included:

-- Paige Patterson, 55, president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C., was elected SBC president, 20 years after he helped engineer a theological and political movement which propelled conservatives to power in the nation's largest Protestant organization.

Patterson, who was unopposed for the office, said he would emphasize evangelism and church planting in his presidency. He described a personal goal for the convention is for Southern Baptists to baptize 1 million people -- 500,000 in the United States and 500,000 abroad -- in the year 2000.

Rick Ferguson of Colorado defeated Californian William Wagner for the office of first vice president. Mike Gray of Utah won a three-way race for second vice president. Recording Secretary John Yeats was re-elected as recording secretary without opposition. Long-time Registration Secretary Lee Porter was re-elected over Colorado pastor Ken Barnett by a vote of 1,676 to 1,310.

-- Messengers approved a recommendation to shorten the SBC annual meeting from three days to two days, beginning next year. They also gave initial approval to a name change for the Baptist Sunday School Board, which will be renamed LifeWay Christian Resources of the Southern Baptist Convention.

A motion to change the name of the convention to the "Baptist Convention of North America" was referred to the SBC Executive Committee, along with another motion to consider a name change.

-- A resolution critical of the Mormon church affirmed "the finality, sufficiency and exclusivity" of the Christian gospel and the Bible as "the sole source of saving truth." Another resolution decried moral misconduct by public officials. An amendment mentioning President Clinton by name was defeated.

Other resolutions called on Congress to nullify an executive order by President Clinton banning discrimination against gays in federal workplaces, endorsed efforts by states to pass "covenant marriage" laws to make it harder to get a divorce, opposed women in combat and protested "anti-Christian bigotry" in federally funded National Endowment for the Arts and on public television.

-- In the convention sermon, SBC Executive Committee chairman James Merritt hailed the SBC's current conservative theology and labeled Mormonism a "false" gospel.

"The Bible is the only word we have from God, and it is the only word we need from God," said Merritt, pastor of First Baptist Church in Snellville, Ga. "Therefore, we don't need Joseph Smith, Mary Baker Eddy, Ellen White, golden tablets, dreams and visions or another testament." Any group that views any other book than the Bible as inspired, said Merritt, "let that group be anathema."

-- SBC president Tom Elliff, in his address to the convention, urged Southern Baptists to continue to "chart our course by the unchanging Christ" after instituting conservative reforms during the 1980s. Using a metaphor comparing the SBC to a ship's hull, he referred to moderates as "barnacles of parasitic unions, conferences and fellowships, no matter how Baptist or Cooperative they might have deemed themselves."

Moderate leader David Currie noted that the Baptist General Convention of Texas, which is controlled by moderates, has grown at a faster rate than the SBC, and that without it, the SBC "ship would meet the same fate as the Titanic."

-- Registration for the convention was 8,577 at the start of the final session, making it the smallest convention in 47 years. The last crowd that small was in 1951, when 6,493 messengers met in San Francisco. The next-smallest convention in recent years came in 1973 in Portland, Ore., with 8,871 messengers.

Jeannette Briggs, a member and deacon at University Baptist Church in Fort Worth, Texas, became the millionth SBC messenger when she registered at 8:45 a.m., Monday, June 8. The convention was established in 1845.

-- Some 2,200 volunteers to blanket Salt Lake City and surrounding communities for the "Crossover '98," an annual evangelism blitz held prior to the convention. More than 1,200 Utah residents prayed to receive Christ during the event, and more than 5,600 people called into a phone bank in response to advertising offering a free Jesus video, according to reports.

-30-

Jerry Falwell attends SBC, this time as a messenger

By David Winfrey

SALT LAKE CITY (ABP) -- Jerry Falwell has spoken at the Southern Baptist Convention Pastors' Conference, preached in the pulpits of Southern Baptist churches and put Southern Baptists on the trustee board of his Liberty University.

So in many respects his registering for the first time ever as a voting messenger to the SBC annual meeting was simply confirmed the trend in which he has been moving for several years, said the pastor of Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Va.

"I've been attending the Southern Baptist Convention for many years. This is the first time we have taken 10 messengers and voted," Falwell said in an interview during the June 9-11 convention in Salt Lake City. "I don't know why we decided to send messengers this time as opposed to earlier, but we did."

Falwell and seven other members of Thomas Road Baptist Church registered as messengers, according to Registration Secretary Lee Porter. The church reported giving \$10,000 to SBC causes last year through a new state convention formed by conservatives in Virginia.

"We have officially joined about a year ago," Falwell said, adding that he has no intention of leaving some of the other independent groups he has supported through the years. "We still hold membership in and give support to other groups that we've been affiliated with for 42 years."

Falwell said his decision to join the SBC follows the completion of the denomination's move toward a more conservative stance.

"All six of the seminaries now have biblical inerrantists as presidents. All the Southern Baptist agencies now are headed by inerrantists, and the thing that many of us thought never could happen -- that is the return of the denomination to biblical authority -- has happened," he said.

Falwell said other churches also have joined the convention for the same reason. "I'm sure others will."

"There is now no reason why we shouldn't be a part of it," he added. "We now feel the liberty to support the convention and to participate."

Falwell said he doesn't expect criticism from independent Baptists for the decision to formally join the SBC.

"We are still in good fellowship," he said. "We have not abandoned the Baptist Bible Fellowship (a group of independent Baptist churches)."

He said he doesn't intend to take an SBC leadership role, noting his responsibilities for Liberty University, the "Old Time Gospel Hour" broadcast and the 20,000-member church occupy his time.

"I don't have any plan to get politically involved, just spiritually involved," he said. "I really, at age 64, don't have the energy to take on anything new."

Falwell, a longtime friend of newly-elected SBC President Paige Patterson, said he does intend to be involved in Patterson's goal of baptizing 1 million new Christians during the year 2000.

"We're training 1,000 pastors right now," he said. "Church planting is a major priority with me and has been all of my ministry. It is with Paige Patterson, and we plan to coalesce with our graduates in planting a lot of new Southern Baptist churches."

-30-

EDITOR'S NOTE: The following story updates an earlier version posted yesterday.

SBC resolutions describe 'true' gospel, demand moral character from leaders

By Bob Allen

SALT LAKE CITY (ABP) -- Meeting near the headquarters of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Southern Baptist Convention adopted a resolution declaring that Mormons aren't Christians.

Another resolution at the June 9-11 convention in Salt Lake City decried moral misconduct by public officials in general. An amendment mentioning President Clinton by name was defeated.

Convention resolution No. 1 affirmed "the finality, sufficiency and exclusivity" of the Christian gospel and the Bible as "the sole source of saving truth."

The resolution, titled "On the true Christian gospel," does not mention the LDS church by name, but it repudiates several Mormon teachings by affirming the Trinity, stating that Jesus was conceived without sexual relations and rejecting the idea that humans can merit salvation by good works.

SBC messengers, meeting June 9-11 in Salt Lake City, adopted the non-binding declaration without discussion. "If you'll read this resolution, you'll understand the significance of this resolution to the world," SBC president Tom Elliff said after the vote.

Michael Whitehead, chairman of the convention's resolutions committee, told reporters the resolution includes Mormons but also has a "broader application" to other faiths that teach there are other paths to salvation than faith in Jesus Christ.

The LDS church, founded in 1830 by Joseph Smith, rejects the historic creeds of orthodox Christianity and sees itself as restoring the state of the Christian faith before it became tainted by Western philosophies.

Mormons read the Bible -- though they interpret it differently than other denominations -- but also possess other holy writings including the Book of Mormon. Other unique LDS teachings include the idea that God was once a man, that he literally fathered Jesus through sexual intercourse with Mary and that individuals can eventually become gods by leading a devout life.

While Mormons consider themselves to be Christians, an interfaith-witness bulletin published by Southern Baptists' North American Mission Board groups the faith under a category of "cults, sects and new religious movements."

The resolution describes God as "the only true, eternal Creator and self-sufficient, self-existent Sovereign of the universe" who is revealed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It calls Jesus Christ "the unique and eternal Son of God" who "was supernaturally conceived of the Holy Spirit, without sexual relations, born of the virgin Mary."

It affirms salvation is by grace through faith and that "all human works, merits and forms of righteousness are as filthy rags in God's sight."

The resolution also notes, "There have been and will be many false and counterfeit Christs."

James Smith, a member of the resolutions committee, described the resolution as "a concise statement of what the gospel is."

"This is the gospel all men and women and boys and girls in this city and throughout the world need to know, and this is why we brought this as our first resolution," said Smith, a former employee at the SBC's Christian Life Commission who now attends Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

Another resolution "on moral character of public officials" noted "serious allegations ... about moral and legal misconduct by certain public officials." It called on Americans to "embrace and act on the conviction that character does count in public office" and to elect officials who "demonstrate consistent honesty, moral purity and the highest character."

The convention rejected an amendment to the resolution that would have mentioned President Bill Clinton, a Southern Baptist who has been accused of sexual misconduct, by name. "There are plenty of names on both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue to which this resolution might be applicable," Whitehead said.

Another resolution called on Congress to nullify an executive order by President Clinton banning discrimination against gays in federal workplaces. Messengers rejected an amendment to the resolution that would have urged Clinton's home church to exercise discipline should he refuse to rescind the order.

Other SBC resolutions endorsed efforts by states to pass "covenant marriage" laws to make it harder to get a divorce, opposed women in combat and protested "anti-Christian bigotry" in federally funded National Endowment for the Arts and on public television.

SBC narrowly rejects amendment urging 'discipline' by Clinton's church

By Bob Allen

SALT LAKE CITY (ABP) -- The Southern Baptist Convention narrowly rejected an amendment asking Bill Clinton's home church to put pressure on the president to rescind an order protecting the civil rights of federal employees who are gay.

The convention adopted a resolution June 11 urging Congress to nullify Clinton's May 28 order prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation in the federal civilian workforce. But it rejected an amendment that would have urged his home church "to prayerfully consider disciplinary action" if Clinton refuses to rescind the order.

Wiley Drake, pastor of First Southern Baptist Church of Buena Park, Calif., proposed the amendment, "based on the holy Word of God and the church's possible violation" of an article in the SBC constitution denying membership to churches which "act to affirm, approve or endorse homosexual behavior."

Messengers to the June 9-11 convention in Salt Lake City rejected the amendment by 66 votes -- 1,071 to 1,005.

Clinton is a member of Immanuel Baptist Church in Little Rock, Ark. He attended regularly and sang in the choir when he was the Arkansas governor, but he now most often attends church at a United Methodist congregation in Washington.

Immanuel Pastor Rex Horne said he is not surprised the issue was raised because of Clinton's high profile, but he added, "We don't look to a convention resolution to instruct us on how to carry out the Lord's work here."

Criticism over Clinton's membership is nothing new for the Little Rock church, which has endured picketers and other protests since Clinton's 1992 election as president. At the 1994 Southern Baptist Convention in Orlando, Fla., a motion was made to deny seating to the church's messengers for failing to repudiate Clinton's policies on abortion and gays in the military. That motion was defeated, but only after the church's 10 messengers were forced to face charges in a hearing before the SBC credentials committee.

Drake is a familiar figure at SBC annual meetings for high-profile views on a variety of issues. He offered several motions and resolutions at this year's convention. He is best known for his criticism of the Walt Disney Co. and for a well-publicized zoning dispute over his allowing homeless people to camp on his church's property.

"One of our Southern Baptist churches has the president of the United States going around the country saying he is Southern Baptist," Drake said. Drake said he is "sick and tired" of people challenging his arguments that certain behaviors are immoral by responding that Clinton, also a Southern Baptist, has a different view.

"I'm tired of defending it and I think we ought to go on record saying Mr. Clinton ought to be dealt with by his local church," Drake said.

-30-

-- Trennis Henderson contributed to this story.

Top Wisconsin court upholds Milwaukee voucher program

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Wisconsin's top court has approved a plan to allow low-income students in Milwaukee to attend parochial schools at taxpayer expense.

The 4-2 ruling said that expanding Milwaukee's voucher program to include religious schools does not violate the church-state separation provisions of the Wisconsin or U.S. constitutions.

The decision, likely to be appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, reversed rulings by two lower state courts.

Milwaukee started a school-voucher program in 1990 after state lawmakers approved a limited program to address the city's troubled public schools. The original program permitted up to 1,500 (1.5 percent) public school students to attend private, nonsectarian schools.

In 1995, the legislature expanded the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program by allowing religious schools to participate and by increasing to 15,000 (15 percent) the number of Milwaukee public-school students who could take part in the program.

Expansion of the voucher program was challenged by Wisconsin taxpayers and several organizations, including Americans United for Separation of Church and State, People for the American Way, and the American Civil Liberties Union.

Dane County Judge Paul Higginbotham and a state appeals court panel ruled that expanding the program to religious schools violated the state constitution.

Noting that most of expenditures under the expanded program would go to religious schools, the appeals court concluded that a primary effect of the program "is the drawing of money from the state treasury for the benefit of religious schools."

But the Wisconsin Supreme Court disagreed. In an opinion written by Justice Donald Steinmetz, the court ruled that the program did not violate the First Amendment's church-state separation mandate.

The voucher program is constitutional, the court said, "because it has a secular purpose, it will not have the primary effect of advancing religion, and it will not lead to excessive entanglement between the state and participating sectarian private schools."

The top Wisconsin court said the voucher program does not have the primary effect of advancing religion because it "places on equal footing options of public and private school choice and vests in the hands of parents to choose where to direct the funds allocated for their children's benefit."

Reversing the two lower courts, the state Supreme Court said the voucher program did not violate state constitutional bans against the compelled support of any place of worship or ministry or the use of state funds for the benefit of religious groups or seminaries.

While the ruling was hailed by voucher advocates, including Wisconsin Gov. Tommy Thompson, it drew criticism from organizations supporting church-state separation.

Baptist Joint Committee General Counsel Brent Walker questioned the court's conclusion that the program would not have a primary effect of advancing religion.

"How can a voucher scheme not advance religion when most of the money goes to church schools?" he asked. "There is no meaningful choice in between the cutting and the cashing of the check."

Under the program, checks are made out to a parent or guardian but are sent directly to the private school where they must be "restrictively endorsed" by the parent or guardian for use by the private school.

Carole Shields, president of People for the American Way, said the decision "opens the way for millions of dollars of everyone's taxes to be misused to promote someone else's religion."

Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, said the ruling "strikes at the heart of the First Amendment, ignores the language of the state constitution and overlooks every other court ruling on public funding of religion."

Lynn said the case is not over and vowed that "today's ruling will be appealed."

-30-

RFRA-like measure introduced in Congress

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- U.S. lawmakers are attempting a second approach at a constitutional means of protecting religious liberty in the wake of a 1990 Supreme Court decision that made it easier for government to interfere with religious practices.

After the 1990 "Employment Division vs. Smith" decision, Congress worked with a broad coalition of religious and civil liberties organizations to enact the 1993 Religious Freedom Restoration Act.

But in 1997, the Supreme Court ruled in "Boerne vs. Flores" that Congress lacked the authority to enforce upon states the heightened protections for religious practice. Congress had relied on the powers granted to it under Section 5 of the 14th Amendment.

Fulfilling a promise made after the Boerne decision, lawmakers introduced the Religious Liberty Protection Act June 9. The measure would apply the same legal standard enacted through RFRA -- it would bar state and local officials from substantially burdening religious exercise unless they use the least restrictive means of furthering a compelling state interest, such as health or safety. This law, however, would be applied to the states mainly through Congress' spending and interstate commerce powers.

The bill's sponsors are Sens. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, and Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., and Reps. Charles Canady, R-Fla., and Jerrold Nadler, D-N.Y. A broad group of religious and civil-liberties groups stood with members of Congress outside the Capitol to announce the introduction of the bill.

Hatch said, "Last year, when the Supreme Court struck down part of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act in the case of City of Boerne vs. Flores -- an act that sought to redress a threat to religious liberty of the court's own making -- we who value the free exercise of religion vowed we would rebuild our coalition and craft a solution which appropriately defers to the court's decision."

He added that the bill has been limited and narrowed in its application to the states "so that we think it passes constitutional scrutiny. Frankly, I think the court, with a little luck ... will overrule the Smith case ultimately. That would certainly help. I might add that this is pushing the court to do that."

Kennedy said, "Too frequently today, ... the complex rules used to govern our modern society and economy unnecessarily, and often unintentionally, interfere with religious freedom."

"We believe Congress has the power to protect that freedom, and the bipartisan legislation we are introducing today does so in accord with the guidelines established by the Supreme Court," he said.

Under RLPA, government officials could not burden religious exercise that is in or affects commerce with foreign nations, among the states or with Indian tribes. It would also bar the burdening of religion in a program or activity operated by a government entity that receives federal financial assistance.

A 20-member drafting committee from the Coalition for the Free Exercise of Religion spent over nine months drafting legislation in conjunction with lawmakers and their counsel.

Douglas Laycock, a University of Texas law professor who argued in support of RFRA's constitutionality before the Supreme Court, said he would feel "on firmer constitutional ground" if he argued in favor of RLPA today.

"Ninety-five percent of everything Congress does is under these two clauses," Laycock said.

Supporters of RLPA say without RFRA, government has infringed on religious exercise. They argue that there are infringements such as:

- job refusals to those whose faith precludes taking a loyalty oath;
- zoning restrictions that barred an Orthodox Jewish congregation in Los Angeles from meeting in a residential area;
- federal and state bankruptcy provisions have been used to confiscate tithes from churches that were given by individuals who later went bankrupt;
- fire and police department policies against beards that have interfered with the religious practice of Muslims; and
- state laws used by prison officials to prohibit the carrying of alcoholic beverages have blocked the use of sacramental wine in Catholic services.

The Coalition for the Free Exercise of Religion includes more than 80 groups, ranging from the American Civil Liberties Union to James Dobson's Focus on the Family. The coalition was quick to publicly support the measure.

In a Baptist Joint Committee press release, BJC Executive Director James Dunn said that "in the face of the Boerne decision, the free-exercise clause is rendered meaningless and impotent and in need of some legislative Viagra."

Melissa Rogers, BJC associate general counsel, said RLPA "will help religious individuals avoid the choice between compliance with the law or compliance with their conscience."

In a letter to Canady, who chairs the House Constitution Subcommittee, Richard Land said that religious liberty deserves the greatest protection possible. Land, executive director of the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, said that the bill "is a good faith effort to respond to the concerns articulated by the Supreme Court in its decision in Boerne vs. Flores."

Also supporting RLPA is American United for Separation of Church and State. Barry Lynn, American United executive director, said that religious liberty deserves the highest level of judicial protection.

"Although religious motivation alone should not trump all other legal obligations, government should not be able to burden religious practice without a real and compelling justification," said Lynn.

Opposed to RLPA are groups and individuals charging that religious liberty would be reduced to a "level of commerce transaction." A letter of opposition was sent to congressional members by representatives from the Home School Legal Defense Association, Eagle Forum, Concerned Women for America, U.S. Business and Industry Council, Catholic Alliance and others.

"Since religious liberty claimants are required to prove that their exercise of religious faith affects interstate commerce, it forces claimants to justify their faith in God as a commercial transaction," said the letter. "Many of us believe that this is an affront to our faith."

Signing the letter was Mike Farris of Home School Legal Defense, Adrian Rogers of Bellevue Baptist Church in Memphis, Tenn., Phyllis Schlafly of the Eagle Forum and the retired Houston appeals court Judge Paul Pressler.

House and Senate committees are expected to hold hearings on RLPA in the next few weeks.

Townpeople examine own souls following racial murder in Jasper

By Ken Camp

JASPER, Texas (ABP) -- Baptists in the East Texas town of Jasper joined their neighbors in praying, grieving and asking why anyone would beat a disabled African-American man, chain him to the back of a pickup truck and drag him to his death.

"There is a lot of reflection, people asking, 'Have I done anything to foster an atmosphere where this could happen? Have I done anything to prevent an atmosphere from developing where this kind of thing could happen?'" said Ed Robinson, pastor of First Baptist Church in Jasper. "There is some good introspection going on."

The mangled body of James Byrd Jr., a 49-year-old father of three, was discovered Sunday morning, June 7, on a country road outside Jasper. Authorities arrested and charged three ex-convicts, at least two of whom were linked to a white supremacist prison gang, with Byrd's murder. The three suspects were ordered held without bail after arraignment June 9.

Jesse Jackson met with Byrd's family and preached at a Wednesday afternoon prayer service at Greater New Bethel Baptist Church in Jasper on June 10. When the small sanctuary filled, an overflow crowd that included many members of predominantly white Baptist churches held a prayer vigil outside the church.

Local church leaders met the next morning to plan a community-wide prayer service slated for Monday, June 15.

While Byrd's brutal murder apparently was racially motivated, it was "not so much a racial thing as an insane thing," Robinson said, noting that it was not characteristic of a community where blacks and whites know each other well.

"This is not a racist town at all," he said. "That's not to say we don't have our problems with racism, but this isn't who we are."

President Bill Clinton called on the nation to pray for Byrd's family and for the citizens of Jasper.

"In the face of this tragedy, they must join together across racial lines to demonstrate that an act of evil like this is not what this country is all about. I think we've all been touched by it, and I can only imagine that virtually everyone who lives there is in agony at this moment," Clinton said. "But they must affirm -- and so must we -- that we will not tolerate this."

Byrd's murder was "not in isolation from a society that has failed to eradicate racism and its demeaning acts," according to Mike Lundy, associate director of the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission.

Obedient followers of Christ who practice repentance and demonstrate loving reconciliation can "lead the way to healing the soul of our nation," Lundy said. "As we abandon ourselves to God, we will find a way through the troubling separation from our brothers and sisters born of prejudice and fear."

-30-

END