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Southern Baptist family statement sparks debate in media, churches

By Bob Allen

SALT LAKE CITY (ABP) -- One newspaper called it a new round in the battle of the sexes. President Clinton's reaction was "wry amusement." Other critics were not at all amused, while defenders hailed the Southern Baptist Convention's new article on family.

The article, an amendment to the "Baptist Faith and Message" doctrinal statement approved at the SBC's recent annual meeting in Salt Lake City, affirms the family as "the foundational institution of human society." It defines marriage as a lifelong commitment between a man and woman, subtly criticizing divorce and invalidating homosexual unions. It says parents should discipline their children and men should provide for, love and protect their families.

But most attention has been focused on a phrase that a wife should "submit graciously" to her husband's "servant leadership."

"They hope to make June Cleaver the biblical model for motherhood, despite numerous biblical references to women who worked outside the home," Robert Parham, executive director of the independent Baptist Center for Ethics, told the New York Times.

Asked on NBC's "Today" program to respond to Parham's statement, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary President Albert Mohler said Parham's problem is not with the Southern Baptist Convention "but with holy Scripture."

Mohler said later his response to Parham was not intended as a personal attack "but a simple statement that the issue at stake is taken directly from the Bible."

"This is really not a matter of interpretation but of biblical authority," Mohler said.

Richard Land, president of the SBC's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission and a member of the committee which drafted the statement, said the Bible teaches that husbands and wives should seek agreement on decisions affecting their family. But, "There will be those times when there is still disagreement and the time for discussion comes to an end," he said. "I believe the apostle Paul is teaching that it is the husband's responsibility

to make that decision, when there cannot be mutual agreement, and that God holds him accountable and him responsible."

After the convention, Parham reflected, "The fundamentalists have given American families a dog that won't hunt."

Parham said SBC leaders have set up "false choices," by "saying that one is either pro-family or pro-feminism, pro-Bible or pro-culture and pro-leadership or pro-chaos."

"The truth of the matter is that with 60 percent of marriages composed of dual-career couples, many of whom are certainly Christians, Americans favor strong families and equal opportunity and pay for women," Parham said.

Parham said "if fundamentalists want to be consistent" they should add another paragraph to the "Baptist Faith and Message" next year "calling for the reinstatement of slavery."

White House Press Secretary Mike McCurry said President Clinton "noted with wry amusement" a news report about the family article "and thought how he might call it to the attention of the first lady."

McCurry added: "And I don't know whether he elected to do so or not. There are occasions when the president's views as a Southern Baptist are not always identical to those of the Southern Baptist Convention."

William Merrell, vice president for convention relations at the SBC Executive Committee, said media coverage on the adoption of the family article has been mixed.

"Many of the media outlets were fair and provided good contextual information," Merrell said, "but some seemed to have either inaccurate information or the intention not to be comprehensive in their coverage."

Among media critics, Charlotte Observer columnist Dannye Romine Powell wrote: "I commend the convention for wanting to strengthen and support the nuclear family. But 'submission' has never strengthened any institution except slavery."

Also in the Charlotte newspaper, Diana Butler, professor of religious studies at Rhodes College in Memphis, Tenn., wrote of the biblical text on which the submission language is based: "Ephesians 5 is not timeless morality. Rather, it reflects particular problems faced by early Christians in the cultural context of ancient Rome.

"The 'biblical' family -- now enshrined by Southern Baptists -- is not biblical at all. Pagans practiced male headship, early Christians rejected it. They experienced a God who lifts the oppressed from their humble estate."

On CNN's "Talk Back Live," outgoing SBC president Tom Elliff said critics of the statement had taken the phrase about submission out of context and overreacted to the word. "This resolution is a statement of Scripture and it's not calling for a wife to become a door mat for an uncaring husband," he said.

Moderate Baptists, who were shut out of denominational leadership during the 1980s, lined up to criticize the amendment, drafted by a conservative panel chosen by Elliff.

"The SBC is entering the 21st century with a 19th century viewpoint," said Texas moderate leader David Currie. Currie, executive director of Texas Baptists Committed, said the "Baptist Faith and Message" amendment "is harmful to the gospel message as it treats women as second-class citizens."

Currie also took umbrage at a remark in Elliff's presidential address comparing moderate Southern Baptists to barnacles on a ship which should be removed. "(T)he Baptist General Convention of Texas, which has solidly moderate leadership, is growing five times as fast as the SBC," Currie said. "Without counting Texas Baptist statistics and without Texas Baptist money, the SBC would be sinking like the Titanic, stuck on the iceberg of its own narrow theology and ideology.

"Texas Baptists have been the main group keeping the SBC afloat and it is time we seriously consider letting the SBC sink or swim on its own."

Welton Gaddy, executive director of the Interfaith Alliance and a Baptist minister, called the statement "an outrageous attempt to manipulate people of faith and goodwill into a partisan political movement."

"What you have in this development is adherence to a social agenda elevated above affirmation of basic doctrinal beliefs in determining what it means to be a Baptist, and this is unacceptable," said Gaddy, former pastor of Northminster Baptist Church in Monroe, La., and a member of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship's Coordinating Council.

Kirby Godsey, president of Mercer University in Macon, Ga., called the concept that women should be subservient to men "theological nonsense" which is "neither sound Christian doctrine nor consistent with the larger Baptist tradition."

Kathy Manis Findley, a pastor in Little Rock, Ark., and former president of Baptist Women in Ministry, said the new article "technically" does not affect her since she no longer considers herself a Southern Baptist. But she added that whenever something is in the news about women in ministry, she receives hate mail.

When a friend of hers, also a woman, recently moved from a Baptist pastorate in California to a new church in Texas, Findley received three unsigned letters with identical postmarks and handwriting.

"So I suppose I do have a response: a question," Findley said. "What is it exactly that stirs up so much anger and hatred from persons who feel compelled to write letters and never sign their names?"

"I would very much like to talk with these persons who say they are people of faith. I would like to ask them how they are so certain that God has not called me to ministry. I would like to look into their eyes and try to find the Christ that dwells within them. And I cannot help but believe that if they took time to look into my eyes, they would see the same Christ," she said.

The overwhelmingly conservative messengers who voted approval of the statement June 9 supported it wholeheartedly, however, handily turning aside two amendments which would have softened its language on submission and broadened its definition of family to include singles and childless couples.

"I think the statement as a whole is biblical in its approach, strong in its conviction and I supported it at the convention and I support it now," said Ted Traylor, pastor of Olive Baptist Church in Pensacola, Fla.

Traylor viewed discussion over the article as a witnessing opportunity. "It has opened the door to dialogue with a lot of people," Traylor said. He gave out copies of the article to church members, encouraging them to share it with people "who were hearing only the seven or eight words about the submission issue" and "use that as a gateway" into sharing the gospel message.

"I've told our people not to be ashamed of the article, which is now a part of our 'Baptist Faith and Message,'" Traylor said.

Deacons at the moderate First Baptist Church in Raleigh, N.C., meanwhile, responded by asking a denominational-relations committee to consider terminating the congregation's affiliation with the SBC. Pastor Dan Day said a recommendation was expected to come before the full church body June 24.

Merrell estimated reactions he has received in letters, phone calls and e-mails are running 75 percent to 80 percent in favor of the new article. He said he has received several responses from local churches, and "all but one have been positive."

Asked how the attention has affected Southern Baptists' image, Merrell said, "It is certainly important for us to be people of good reputation, but we do not believe our decisions, beliefs or policies should be established with an eye on opinion polls."

"Our strength, if we are to have any, is in our fidelity to the teaching of Scripture," Merrell said.

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-- Kenny Byrd contributed to this story.

SBC leader defends statement on 'Larry King Live' broadcast

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A Southern Baptist Convention leader said June 12 on CNN's "Larry King Live" television program he believes the convention's new statement on family is "incredibly representative of what our churches take for granted as clear biblical teaching."

Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., also responded to criticism that the book of Ephesians, which is used to justify wifely submission, also teaches that slaves should obey their masters.

According to a transcript of the program, another guest, Patricia Ireland, president of the National Organization of Women, said: "The whole notion of separate spheres for men and women, I think it's odd to be able to pull that out of the Bible and not pull with it the ... very close Scriptural line that says slaves should submit to their masters. So I think that we're talking about something Paul wrote. We're not talking about something that was said in the Gospels."

Later Ireland asked Mohler if he thought the concept that slaves should submit to their masters is "something you would say is old fashioned, or out of touch with Christianity?"

"I am not scared off by that passage," Mohler said. "It's in the word of God, which I believe to be God's perfect treasure of truths."

"So you wanted slaves to comply to their masters?" asked host Larry King.

"Well, that text demonstrates that Paul, by ... the Holy Spirit, said, 'Slaves, if you want to know what a model ... Christian looks like, you graciously submit, and thereby gain moral authority,'" Mohler said.

"And you agree with that?" King asked.

"Well, I have to agree with it. It's the word of God," Mohler said, adding, "That is not an endorsement of slavery as an institution."

"So if a foreign power took over this country you would graciously submit to its leadership?" King asked.

Mohler responded: "The Bible tells us that we are graciously to submit to the leaders that he puts in authority. Now, again, what is a distortion is to claim that the Bible endorses slavery. It does no such thing. But it does say, 'If you're a slave, there's a way to behave.' And let me just point out that slavery in America did not end by a revolt by the slaves but by the moral authority that slaves gained as America came to see it as an important sin."

On the same program, Liberty University Chancellor Jerry Falwell, who described himself as a Southern Baptist, defended Mohler's interpretation while adding, "If I had lived back during slavery, I would have started and operated an underground railway to Canada."

Falwell said he counsels women who are being abused by their husbands to leave. "And I'd do everything I can to help the husband learn how to be a better husband. The purpose of the amendment is not to deal with aberrations or the crazies," he said.

Another guest on the program, evangelist Robert Schuller, argued against interpreting the Ephesians passages literally. "The spirit gives life, but the letter kills," Schuller said.

Asked if he is worried about the new plank in the Southern Baptist platform, Schuller replied: "No, no, no. I'm not worried about it at all, because I think every husband and wife in the Baptist denomination will do what they want to do anyway."

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-- By Bob Allen

Dobson hospitalized with possible stroke

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. (ABP) -- Less than a week after delivering the closing message at this year's Southern Baptist Convention, Focus on the Family President James Dobson was hospitalized, possibly with a mild stroke.

According to Evangelical Press, Dobson was hospitalized June 16 in Colorado Springs, Colo., after becoming ill. He was reported to be resting comfortably while undergoing a series of tests.

A preliminary conclusion was that Dobson suffered a mild stroke. There is no paralysis and he seemed to be recovering well.

Dobson's doctor said a heart attack had been ruled out. Dobson suffered a mild heart attack in 1990.

Dobson and his family had recently returned from a conference in Greensboro, N.C. Before that, he spoke June 11 at the Southern Baptist Convention in Salt Lake City.

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-- By ABP staff

Tuscaloosa pastor named next Alabama Baptist exec

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (ABP) -- Alabama Baptists have chosen Tuscaloosa pastor Rick Lance as the next executive secretary-treasurer of the Alabama Baptist State Convention.

The million-member convention's state board of missions unanimously elected Lance at a called meeting June 16. He will succeed Troy Morrison, who has held the post since 1990 and is retiring in January.

Lance, 47, has been pastor of Tuscaloosa's 3,700-member First Baptist Church since 1983. Previous pastorates include First Baptist in Cullman, Ala., and West End Baptist Church in Birmingham.

He is a graduate of Samford University who earned both a master's degree and doctorate at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. An Alabama native, Lance served as the state convention's president from 1990 to 1992. During his presidency, he said he believed in the fundamentals of faith but was unaligned with any political camp in the Southern Baptist Convention controversy.

He is a former trustee for the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board and Samford and is a current trustee for Judson College, an Alabama Baptist school in Marion.

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-- By ABP staff

Congress set to address minors crossing state lines for abortions

By Ashlee Ross

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Following a meeting of religious conservatives and GOP leaders, lawmakers are stepping up the pace on presenting and passing a bill making it a federal offense to transport a minor across state lines to have an abortion.

The Child Custody Protection Act, introduced by Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, R-Fla., and Sen. Spencer Abraham, R-Mich., would make it illegal for anyone other than a parent to transport a minor across state lines to have an abortion.

The bill is expected to reach the House floor in late June.

The bill was first introduced in the Senate in February and in the House in April. Republican supporters placed high priority on the bill less than a week after a meeting between GOP representatives and conservative leaders including radio commentator James Dobson.

The Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, the National Right to Life Committee, the Christian Coalition, the Family Research Council and Concerned Women for America have endorsed the bill.

In a joint letter to Congress, those organizations said passage of the bill "can repudiate the bizarre notion that any adult stranger has a right to secretly take one's 14-year-old daughter to a different state for an abortion."

Ros-Lehtinen said only parents should have the right to parent, and abortion-rights activists should not be able to take this right away.

"Unfortunately, violators of parental rights have taken it upon themselves to make decisions for a child that is not theirs and have found ways to circumvent state laws by transporting these girls across state lines," Ros-Lehtinen said.

Abortion-rights activists have criticized the bill and are lobbying for its defeat.

Janet Crepps, the Washington D.C. director for the Center for Reproductive Law and Policy, criticized the bill.

"We think this is a very dangerous piece of legislation," Crepps said. "We've been actively opposing the bill by trying to educate lawmakers and the public."

Crepps said the bill could have the opposite effect of leaving teenagers with no one to talk to about their decision.

"They will go by themselves to get an abortion," Crepps said. "They won't turn to a trusted adult. They will be isolated."

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Church-state leaders question congressional education bill

By Ashlee Ross

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A provision increasing the maximum amount parents can save in a tax-favored savings account for education at public, private and parochial schools passed the first step in House and Senate negotiations.

House and Senate lawmakers agreed to include the Education Savings Accounts provision during a conference on a broader education-reform package.

The House was expected to vote June 18 on the package, with a Senate vote expected June 23.

The bill, sponsored by Sen. Paul Coverdell, R-Ga., would allow parents, relatives, charities and corporations to place up to \$2,000 tax free in a savings account to help with education expenses for public, private and parochial schools. The bill allows for money to be spent on computers, uniforms, transportation and tuition.

The proposal allows \$2,000 to be saved per year, per child, which is up from the current amount of \$500. Currently, money saved can only be used for higher education, but Coverdell's proposal would expand the usage from kindergarten to higher education.

In addition, Coverdell's bill designates money for literacy programs, grants for high-achieving schools and federal funds for same-sex classrooms and schools.

Representatives from organizations advocating church-state separation responded with concern to Coverdell's bill.

"The Coverdell proposition may be flawed for policy reasons but is not clearly unconstitutional," said Brent Walker, general counsel for the Baptist Joint Committee.

Americans United for Separation of Church and State spoke out against the bill.

"We're very much opposed to this legislation," said Joe Conn, communications director for Americans United. "We see it as a foot in the door to broader tax aid for private and religious schools."

In a press release, Coverdell urged President Clinton to "abandon his stubborn defense of failed education policies" and to support ESA.

Although the bill is expected to pass the House and Senate, President Clinton has pledged to veto it.

"We hope he will put an end to it then," Conn said.

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