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Baptist editors evaluate family issue, other aspects of '98 SBC

By Bob Allen and Trennis Henderson

SALT LAKE CITY (ABP) -- Baptist editors were divided in their evaluations of a new statement on families passed recently by the Southern Baptist Convention.

In editorials published since the June 9-11 SBC annual meeting, some Baptist state newspapers criticized the amendment to the convention's official doctrinal statement, the "Baptist Faith and Message." Others, meanwhile, sought to balance negative reports in secular media about a portion of the statement urging wives to "submit graciously" to their husbands.

While most editors said they agreed with much of the substance of the statement, several said the SBC was wrong in passing the family amendment.

Ferrell Foster of the Illinois Baptist wrote: "(I) disliked adding the family statement to the 'Baptist Faith and Message.' I'm not much for tinkering with time-tested documents in order to speak against contemporary concerns. Plus, Baptists are divided on how to state these principles, and the non-believing world is baffled by it. Understanding of the topic is needed, but I doubt this change helps. I basically agree with its contents, but I do think the husband's role implies a type of submission, in that love is the ultimate expression of submitting oneself to another."

Chip Bayer, editorializing in the Indiana Baptist, strongly defended the family amendment: "The media and those who disagree with the statement on wives submitting to their husbands attacked Southern Baptists as the assumed author of something completely politically incorrect. They were in error to do so. This came from the pen of the apostle Paul under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit -- which makes its author God....So, to those of you who disagree I have but one thing to say. Quite frankly, you don't have a problem with Southern Baptists. You have a problem with God."

Toby Druin, editor of the Baptist Standard in Texas, took a dim view of what he described as an attempt to "nail down the premise that women are to be subservient to men."

"So once again the convention came across as a narrow, rigid organization more interested in orthodoxy than one genuinely interested in families and in sharing a faith in Jesus Christ that radiates love, forgiveness and inclusiveness," Druin wrote.

Other editors argued the statement was largely misunderstood by the media.

William Neal of Georgia's Christian Index observed: "We Baptists have an important obligation to the society in which we live to expound on biblical principles, and more importantly, to give witness by example, living out the principles we espouse. But we often fail to adequately communicate to people outside the church because we are not sensitive to how we word our statements so as to avoid being misunderstood. ... I can buy into what the 'Baptist Faith and Message' now says about the family. It is biblical and it is helpful. I just wish that it could have been worded differently in some phrases in order to avoid the misunderstandings that are sure to develop."

Michael Chute of the Florida Baptist Witness editorialized: "Submitting to another person is usually misunderstood. It's not becoming a doormat for someone. ...What the world doesn't understand is that when we submit to God, we become more willing to obey his command to submit to others -- to subordinate our rights to their rights. In a marriage relationship, both husband and wife are called to submit. For the wife, this means willingly following her husband's leadership in Christ. For the husband, it means putting aside his own interests in order to care for his wife."

William Perkins of the Mississippi Baptist Record lambasted news coverage of the convention: "News media focused on one tiny portion of the [family] amendment and did their best to interpret it out of context with a secular spin. ...With little research and virtually no attempt at understanding, the media informed the country that Southern Baptists were in favor of domineering, violently patriarchal relationshipsWhether one was for or against the amendment, it is obvious that Baptists were mischaracterized and cast in a pejorative light. That should upset all of us."

Don Kirkland of South Carolina's Baptist Courier said the statement could be helpful to churches but is subject to misunderstanding: "The article on the family ... can serve Southern Baptists well if it is viewed in light of the teachings of Christ and applied to home life as his Spirit dictates. The result ought to be a relationship between a husband and wife that is nourishing to each and pleasing to God. Mishandled, the article will serve only to sow discord."

Mark Wingfield of Kentucky's Western Recorder opposed the statement, viewing it in context of the SBC's conservative-moderate power struggle stemming from the late 1970s. "Despite all the political wrangling of the last 20 years, Southern Baptists previously had not changed our basic statement of beliefs. ... That changed in Salt Lake City when the 'Baptist Faith and Message' was amended. A matter on which there are divergent opinions and interpretations of Scripture among Southern Baptists was given only one definitive interpretation. The view of one segment of Baptist life was represented as the view of all. ...What the world -- and those we're trying to reach with the gospel -- needs to see most from the church is the kind of humility and self-sacrifice Paul talked about, not a proud, public posturing about headship and submission."

Editorials also focused on such issues as Mormonism and Crossover ministry efforts held in conjunction with the SBC, held this year in Salt Lake City, headquarters city for the Church of Jesus Christ, Latter-day Saints.

Mark Wyatt of the California Southern Baptist wrote: "Much of the business Baptists did in Salt Lake City took place away from their convention sessions. In hotels and restaurants, in shops and on busy streets, they made thousands of impressions on local residents. Some were incidental, but many produced eternal results. More than 1,700 people accepted Jesus Christ as Savior through various organized activities and one-on-one encounters."

Bill Webb of Missouri's Word and Way observed: "Few Mormons made professions of faith ... as a result of Baptist witness. But many were challenged to look to the Bible as their sole spiritual guide and to dare to question how Mormon beliefs stack up against the Scriptures."

Paige Patterson's election as SBC president also provided fodder for editorials.

Michael Clingenpeel of Virginia's Religious Herald noted: "No one can fault Paige Patterson and Paul Pressler for lack of vision. In 1979 the two Texans, a preacher and a layman, launched a movement to alter the identity of America's largest Protestant denomination, the Southern Baptist Convention. It took 10 years to solidify control over the convention's bureaucracy. Another decade was required to manipulate the denominational machinery to reshape its identity. The election of Patterson as president of the SBC symbolized the fruition of what Patterson himself called an 'essential and necessary exercise in self-definition.' An exercise in self-definition? Yes. Essential and necessary? That's debatable."

Bob Terry of the Alabama Baptist said Patterson's current role as president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary "raises the issue of precedence."

"For more than 50 years leadership of the convention has rested largely in the hands of pastors. Only rarely has a non-pastor served in the lofty office of president. Now that has changed. A sitting seminary president has been tapped for the top office, and he was unopposed. Does this usher in a new era where denominational leadership will come from entity heads of the SBC rather than from pastors? ... Do we face 20 to 30 years of the president being an SBC employee? Only history can answer these questions."

Trennis Henderson of the Arkansas Baptist Newsmagazine analyzed the narrow defeat of an amendment which would have urged President Clinton's home church, Immanuel Baptist Church in Little Rock, to chastise the president for his policies toward gays.

"At first glance, the issue appeared to be Southern Baptists' historic opposition to homosexuality," Henderson wrote. "In reality, the issue was Southern Baptists' commitment to local church autonomy. The discussion began with consideration of a resolution opposing President Clinton's recent executive order protecting homosexuals from discrimination in the federal civilian workplace. ... The debate took an unfortunate turn, however, when messenger Wiley Drake of California proposed that the SBC urge Clinton's home church to 'prayerfully consider disciplinary action.'...Only 51.6 percent of the 2,076 voting messengers came down on the side of autonomy....The bottom line is that Southern Baptists -- at least 51.6 percent of recent messengers -- still affirm the vital role of local church autonomy."

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Texas, Virginia convention realignments changing Baptist context, Leonard says

By Marv Knox

HOUSTON (ABP) -- Actions within the Texas and Virginia Baptist state conventions are changing the context of the Southern Baptist denomination, historian Bill Leonard told 900 participants at a recent Texas Baptists Committed banquet in Houston.

Leonard, a native Texan and noted analyst of American church history, is dean of the Wake Forest University Divinity School in Winston-Salem, N.C.

"Virginia produced the first official schism in the controversy, with that state now split between two separate organizations, both recognized by the national Southern Baptist Convention," he said. Southern Baptist Conservatives of Virginia split off from the longstanding Baptist General Association of Virginia, claiming closer allegiance to the SBC.

"A second schism looms in Texas," Leonard told the moderate group which has held power in the state convention despite a takeover of the national convention by conservatives. Southern Baptists of Texas, a split-off counterpart to the new Virginia group, has announced it will form a convention separate from the Baptist General Convention of Texas this fall.

The pending split in Texas has been blamed on what Leonard called the "Texas Solution." It includes a vote in 1994 redefining the Cooperative Program unified budget so that affiliated churches may use it as a channel of support to Baptist groups outside the SBC. It also includes a set of recommendations, approved last year, that will enable the Texas convention to do several tasks previously assigned solely to the national convention.

Leonard said the Texas action "is particularly significant for several reasons."

"First, because of the numbers involved," he said. "Texas Baptists number almost 3 million persons, roughly one-fifth of the SBC itself. Thus, the changes ... go a long way to making the BGCT the ninth-largest denomination in the United States."

"Second, these changes reflect a general trend among American religious groups to promote regionalism and localism ahead of national denominational alignments.

"Third, the actions come at a time when American religion itself is in a state of permanent transition. Old ways of organizing religious communities -- specifically the denominational systems -- are realigning, re-forming, reconnecting and, in some cases, collapsing."

Although denominations are not defunct, they provide decreasing impact on individuals' identity, he said. Leonard urged Texas Baptists to focus on three key areas as they chart their course into the future:

-- Identity

"Articulating an identity -- what it means to be Baptist -- is a formidable task in these days," he acknowledged. "Historically, ... denominations helped new converts know who they were and who they were not, religiously speaking."

From his boyhood in Decatur, Texas, Leonard recounted shapers of Baptist identity, such as the King James Bible, a common Sunday school lesson and "an envelope in which you placed the weekly tithe and listed your Christian devotion in a six-point system." He also recalled key worship and social differences between his BGCT-affiliated congregation and the Fundamental, Independent Baptist church in town.

"Today, that Baptist system that nurtured many of us is going, going, gone. And the question looms large: What Baptist identity will we pass on to new generations?"

Attempts to define that identity must be creative, not simply "the old traditions, structures and forms of piety," he said.

-- Polity.

"An important element of the Texas re-formation involves Baptist polity -- what it means to be together in specific Christian community," Leonard said.

"The 'Texas Solution' ... illustrates modifications in polity and a return to the older society method of church cooperation," he said. Before Baptists organized conventions, they worked together in societies, "task-specific" organizations that enabled individuals, associations and churches to fund such ministries as missions, publishing, education and evangelism.

"These days, a de facto society method is apparent throughout Baptist life," he observed, noting Texas Baptist developments allow "society options in funding and missionary participation."

For example, "churches may decide to fund and participate in the Southern Baptist Convention, the state convention, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, the Baptist World Alliance and other entities," he said. "These entities, including the BGCT, are essentially clearinghouses, facilitating local churches and regional gatherings.

"Texas thus has a grand opportunity to model these changes in polity -- a case study in Baptist reorganization and realignment toward a new century."

-- Theology.

Despite 20 years of theological disputes, Baptists still need to engage in theological discussion, Leonard asserted.

"In the midst of the debates and derision of the last two decades, little serious theological dialogue has occurred," he said. "Theological discussion is messy, abrasive, exciting, dangerous and absolutely necessary.

"What will it mean in Texas? Can we pursue theological conversation without the accusation, character assassination and diatribe that has characterized the last 20 years?"

Leonard suggested four specific topics for discussion and education: the Bible, Calvinism, conversion and baptism.

A resurgence of Calvinism in some segments of Southern Baptist life "opens doors to talk about election, free will, the atonement and the destiny of non-elect infants that call us to confront our basic theological orientations," Leonard said.

"Calvinism won't save us, but it might facilitate a good discussion of doctrinal issues."

Trends toward baptism of young children and rebaptizing adults who doubt their faith raise new questions about the meaning of conversion, he said. "If we are going to baptize children, how will we nurture them to faith so that they do not race to rebaptism at every life crisis?"

Many Baptist churches, meanwhile, Leonard said, "are revisiting the baptism question, trying to decide how to retain this distinctive while recognizing the growing number of longtime Christians who are attending Baptist churches, experiencing Christian community, but unable for conscience sake to receive the required rebaptism, often years after their own profession of faith."

"If it is any consolation, this may be the most enduring controversy in Baptist history, with saintly, thoughtful people on both sides of this issue."

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Study gives insight to religious, political behavior

By Marv Knox

OXNARD, Calif. (ABP) -- Most Americans believe these are the "good old days," according to a new survey by the Barna Research Group, an observer of U.S. religious trends.

"Most Americans possess a positive view of life at the end of the 20th century," reported George Barna, the firm's president and founder.

"Three out of four (75 percent) say they are either completely or mostly satisfied with their life these days," Barna said. "A similar portion (76 percent) are 'excited about the future.'"

Two-thirds of Americans told researchers they are comfortable financially. Meanwhile, only about one-third indicated they feel "stressed out," and a similar number said they are "searching for meaning in life."

"One of the reasons underlying people's sense of security is their religious faith," Barna said. "Overall, seven out of 10 Americans describe themselves as religious, and nearly two-thirds say they are 'a committed Christian.'"

Several other indicators revealed faith is vital to most Americans, he added.

For example, 83 percent said "religious faith is very important" to them.

This feeling pervades even the "least overtly religious segments of the population," Barna said. He cited agreement with this statement among vast majorities of men (77 percent), residents of the Northeast (77 percent), single adults (79 percent), Baby Busters (81 percent) and liberals (74 percent).

Research shows Christianity is holding its own, even in a day of religious pluralism, he said.

"Despite all of the talk about the encroachment of non-Christian faiths in America, the reality is that more than four out of five people still view themselves as Christian," he said. "The real transformations relate to what people believe the content of the Christian faith to be and how dedicated they are to living out the precepts of Christianity."

"The fact that so many people behave in ways that contradict the principles of the faith they claim to possess may be attributed to spiritual ignorance as much as to cultural seduction."

The new research reveals "people view life in very different ways," Barna said. He cited several demographic factors that help determine Americans' outlook:

-- Gender.

"Women emerged as much more likely than men to describe themselves as religious (76 percent versus 64 percent), as Christian (86/77) and as a committed Christian (69/53)," he said.

"Men were more than twice as likely as women to declare that they are atheist, agnostic or have no religious faith (15 percent versus 6 percent)."

-- Financial status.

Increase in income reduces Americans' religious ties, the survey showed.

"Upscale individuals also tend to be more satisfied with life, more excited about the future and more apt to believe they are seen as leaders and are more likely to acknowledge living in financial comfort," Barna explained. "The affluent are less likely to ... be searching for meaning in life."

-- Ethnicity.

White adults are the Americans who are most likely to feel satisfied with their life, to say they are financially comfortable and to describe themselves as Christian, research discovered.

Conversely, non-whites are almost twice as prone to search for life's meaning and to feel stressed out.

-- Age.

Baby Busters -- Americans from 18 to 32 -- are the least likely to say they are religious (62 percent), Christian (72 percent) or committed Christians (46 percent).

Baby Boomers -- age 33 to 51 -- are the ones most likely to define themselves as leaders (69 percent) and financially comfortable (68 percent).

Older Americans -- age 52 and up -- are the most religious, most pervasively Christian, the most satisfied with their lives and the most likely to be conservative.

-- Location.

People who live in the Northeast are the least likely to be politically conservative. They paired with residents of the West to be the Americans least likely to be religious and Christian.

Residents in the South and Midwest hold similar views and are more likely than people elsewhere to describe themselves as religious, Christian and committed Christians.

-- Marriage.

Married people are more likely than singles to define themselves as religious, Christian, committed Christians, conservative, financially comfortable, leaders and satisfied with life, the survey showed.

Singles are more inclined to search for meaning and to be politically liberal.

-- Parenthood.

Adults with children under age 18 who live at home are more likely than empty-nest parents to admit they are searching for meaning, stressed and also excited about the future. They also are only half as likely as empty-nesters to say they are liberal.

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