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## Critics say SBC family statement singles out married with children

By Ashlee Ross

(ABP) -- While the Southern Baptist Convention's recent statement on the family has drawn much attention for advocating wifely submission, some single adults are more concerned about what it doesn't say.

The convention voted in June to add the new article on family to Southern Baptists' official doctrinal statement, the 1963 "Baptist Faith and Message."

The new article defines family as "persons related to one another by marriage, blood or adoption" and urges a wife to "submit herself graciously to the servant leadership of her husband."

With its emphasis on marriage and parenting, some critics say the article forgets singles, who by some estimates comprise more than a third of adult members of Southern Baptist churches.

"I feel like it discredits the singles as a family unit," said Brenda Atkinson, minister of adults at Mt. Pleasant Baptist Church in Charleston, S.C., and coordinator for state single ministries in South Carolina. "When I first heard it, I felt like it set us back 10 to 20 years."

A proposed amendment to the statement clarifying that single adults, childless couples, widows and widowers are also legitimate expressions of family was defeated on a show-of-hands vote. The chairman of the committee which drafted the family article spoke against the change, arguing those groups are covered in the committee's succinct definition of family.

The proposed amendment was made by Dennis Wiles, pastor of First Baptist Church in Huntsville, Ala. In an interview, Wiles said the statement as it is now written should be called "marriage and parenting" instead of "family."

"The reason I made the proposal in the first place to amend the article on family was because I felt the article was too narrow in its scope," Wiles said. "There is nothing in the article itself that acknowledges single adults or childless couples. We need to acknowledge that there are several legitimate expressions of family."

"We're at a point in Baptist life where it would be advisable to take steps toward unity and be inclusive of those who comprise the Baptist family," Wiles said.

Dianne Swaim of Little Rock, Ark., a seminar leader and speaker in the area of single adults, said she doesn't think messengers intended to harm single ministry.

"I don't really think they had single adults in mind at all," Swaim said. "I think it was not an agenda against singleness, simply a statement toward marriage and the family that results from it. I think the resolution was simply an attempt to reaffirm the family and just left out singleness and some forms of family."

Atkinson agreed that not including a reference to unmarrieds in the statement was probably an oversight.

"I don't believe there's anybody in our convention who meant it to degrade single parents," Atkinson said. "I don't think they thought through the people it would affect. I really feel like it did, in some aspects, set us back."

Atkinson pointed out that key characters in the New Testament -- including Mary, Martha, Lazarus, Jesus and Paul -- were single. She questioned how the statement, based on numerous Bible texts, could omit a biblical position affirming singleness.

"When they just put it in the marriage context, it makes singles feel like they have no place," Atkinson said. "They don't need to feel like there's something wrong with them because they are that way or because they choose to live that way."

Anthony Jordan, chair of the seven-member committee which drafted the family article, said singles are included in the first part of the statement which says families are "composed of persons related to one another by marriage, blood, or adoption."

"In no way did our committee desire to exclude singles," said, Jordan, executive director of the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma. "I have a great love for singles. Certainly, singles are a part of the family of God."

Ben Young, minister of singles at Second Baptist Church in Houston and host of The Single Connection, a radio show for single adults, also said the amendment proposed by Wiles was unnecessary.

"I don't think that amendment needs to be a part of the statement, because single adults comprise a family," Young said.

But Young agreed that many Baptist churches are "behind the curve" in outreach to singles. In some churches, singles cannot be deacons or ministers, he said. "The church needs to wake up in a lot of ways and say that it [singleness] is a legitimate way of life."

Ironically, despite the current fuss, Southern Baptists traditionally have been at the forefront of ministry to single adults.

More than 5,000 people attended regional single-adult retreats -- sponsored annually by the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board -- last Labor Day weekend. With 65,000 subscribers, Southern Baptists' Christian Single has the largest readership of any magazine for Christian singles.

Harold Ivan Smith, a Kansas City, Mo., writer, said Southern Baptists have traditionally had a "front-line outreach to single adults."

Smith said he hopes controversy over the statement will not detract from that ministry.

"I think the issue will really be focused on how individual congregations will interpret this statement," Smith said. "I hope it becomes a subject of dialogue, not a statement of debate."

Denominational statistics do not track the marital status of members of Southern Baptist churches, but a 1991 constituency study by the Nashville, Tenn.,-based Sunday School Board found 36 percent of adult Southern Baptists were single.

In the United States, just under 56 percent of adults were married and living with a spouse in 1997, according to a recent Census Bureau report. Nearly 10 percent of adults were divorced and nearly half of women 65 and older were widowed. Among people age 25 to 34 years old, nearly 35 percent had never been married, according to the report.

According to the 1991 study, members of Southern Baptist churches tend to be older than the general population. Therefore, Southern Baptists probably have a higher percentage of persons in the widowed category than the general population and a significantly lower percentage of members in the never-married category.

While many Southern Baptist churches have specific ministries geared for single adults, singles, particularly those who are divorced, sometimes feel like second-class citizens compared to married couples with children.

Lee Hendren, founder and editor of the Joyful Single, a non-denominational newsletter for Christian single adults, said he has heard concerns from many single adults.

"The Southern Baptist church portrays itself as being pro-family, yet they're saying that singles and widows are not considered a legitimate expression of the family," said Hendren, of Branchville, S.C.

"Jesus taught us that under certain circumstances, we were to leave our families and to forsake our families and to go far and wide proclaiming the gospel and preaching the gospel," Hendren said.

"There is a popular phrase right now called what would Jesus do," Hendren said. "If Jesus were to show up at a Southern Baptist church -- and let's remember that he is single -- what would they tell him?"

Hendren recommended 1 Corinthians 7 as a good passage for people trying to understand what the Bible says about marriage.

"When a church says it wants to take the biblical point of view, I have to go back to the Bible and see what the Bible says," Hendren said. "1 Corinthians 7 does not say that marriage is superior to singlehood. It doesn't say singlehood is superior to marriage. It says both are acceptable."

Gary Gray, editor and publisher of Living Solo, a magazine geared for singles ages 25-65, said he's heard some genuine concern over the statement from Baptists and other evangelical Christians.

"For the ecumenical single -- Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian -- the statement the Baptists have made is somewhat of a joke," Gray said. "They look at it with amusement."

David Hargrove, editor of Christian Single, said he has gotten little feedback concerning the family amendment.

Hendren, who calls himself a "disheartened Southern Baptist" and does not currently attend a church, said he is no longer sure about the goals of single-adult ministry in the SBC.

"The Southern Baptist Convention used to have a concept called priesthood of the believer," Hendren said. "In the past few years, I've seen that erode to the point that I'm not sure it even exists anymore, and that just breaks my heart."

While the never-married and divorced are most vocal in their concern about the statement, it also leaves unaddressed the status of widows and widowers, Hendren and Atkinson said.

"A lot of widows do not consider themselves to be single," Hendren said. "If nothing else, this amendment brought some awareness to widows. The church looks at them in a different light because they have lost their husband and as a result, I think they will start to look at the church in a different light."

Atkinson said the family statement would exclude a widow in her church, who is in her 20s.

"She has two children at home and she's trying to do the right thing and keep them in church. She doesn't feel like marriage is the right thing for her right now," Atkinson said.

"How does this make her feel? That her family doesn't really count because there aren't two parents."

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## **Unmarried-couple households number 4.1 million, report says**

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- More than 4.1 million American couples live together out of wedlock, according to a recent Census Bureau report.

More than a third of those households also have children under 15 in the home.

According to a population survey, there were about 4,130,000 unmarried-couple households in the United States in 1997. That was 172,000 more than the previous year's count.

The number of unmarried-couple households has more than doubled since 1985, the study said.

One reason for the increase appears to be that couples are delaying marriage. In 1997, the estimated median age for a first marriage was 26.8 years for men and 25 for women. In 1985, the median ages were 25.5 for men and 23.3 for women.

More than 109 million adults were married and living with their spouse in 1997, the study also reported, roughly 56 percent of the adult population.

About one in four American adults, 57 million, have never been married. Among people age 25 to 34, 35 percent -- 13.9 million -- have not had a first marriage. Among African Americans in that age group, 54 percent have never been married.

In 1997, 19.3 million adults were divorced, about 10 percent of the population. More than 13.7 million were widowed, including nearly half (46 percent) of women age 65 and older. Seventy percent of elderly widows lived alone.

An estimated 7.4 million Americans were married but not living with a spouse, either because they were separated (5 million) or for other reasons (2.4 million).

About 19.8 million children younger than 18 lived with one parent, or 28 percent of all children. Of those who lived with a single parent, 85 percent lived with their mother. In about 40 percent of those cases, the mother had never been married.

Robert Parham, executive director of the Baptist Center for Ethics in Nashville, Tenn., called the data both "a painful reminder of the real situation of the American family" and "an energizing opportunity" for churches to "meet the needs of fatherless children, selfish individuals, divorced couples and widows."

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-- By Bob Allen

## **Moms most important to teens, poll reveals**

By Marv Knox

OXNARD, Calif. (ABP) -- Mom, dad and God are still important to America's teenagers -- no matter what TV and movies say, according to two nationwide surveys.

Polls by the Barna and Gallup organizations provide peeks into the emotional and spiritual aspirations of youth in the United States.

"The relationship between a teen and his or her mother is the most important relationship of all," religion researcher George Barna reported. The Barna Research Group studied teens' views on their relationships as part of an ongoing tracking process of teenage attitudes and values.

"The depth of the relationship between a teenager and his or her mother has extensive implications for the life of the teen," Barna said. "For instance, teenagers who said they were not emotionally close to their mother were three times more likely than other teens to describe themselves as 'lonely.'"

The Barna survey found that teens who said they are emotionally close to their mothers were twice as likely as other teens to say both their parents and siblings influence them "a lot." Those teens also were twice as likely to credit their parents with having "the greatest impact on their personal spiritual development."

"Emotional bonding with one's mother also relates to emotional ties to the father," Barna added. "Teens who were emotionally close to their mother are twice as likely as those who were not to say they are close to the father."

A teen's relationship with Mom additionally impacts the teen's peer relationships, he said. "Teens who are close to their mother exhibit longer-lasting close friendships and more consistency in their close friendships than is true for teenagers who are not emotionally close to their mother."

The Barna survey also showed that parents provide the most consistent influence upon teenagers.

"When asked to evaluate the impact of ... individuals, groups and other influences upon their lives, nothing came close to the influence of parents," Barna said. "Three-fourths of teenagers said their parents influence their lives 'a lot.' In a distant second place on the influence scale were friends; half said their friends have 'a lot' of influence over them."

Ministers ranked fifth out of six kinds of people or groups in influence, he noted. National political leaders ranked last.

Parents also topped the list of spiritual influences for teens. "About half of all teenagers said their parents have the greatest degree of influence on their personal spiritual development," Barna said. "That was six times as many teenagers as credited peers with having such impact, and 12 times as many as attributed the greatest spiritual influence to their church."

Another study, meanwhile, found that church attendance and feelings about family are closely linked.

According to a study by the Gallup organization's Princeton Religion Research Center, teens who attended religious services in the previous week were more likely than their counterparts to live with both biological parents.

Teens who attended worship also are more likely to rate their relationship with their father as "extremely close," the center reported in its newsletter, Emerging Trends. And they are more likely to be disciplined by their own fathers for breaking rules at home and school.

These teens are more inclined than others to believe divorce is too easy to get, the center's survey found. And they are more likely to believe marriage before fatherhood is "extremely important."

Gallup's poll discovered 35 percent of teens claimed religious faith is the most important influence in their lives, and 44 percent also said their religious faith is somewhat important influentially. So, 79 percent indicated religion is a significant influence on them.

Only 21 percent claimed faith is unimportant for them, with 14 percent saying it is "not too important" and 7 percent saying it is "not at all important."

One-half of all teens said their life "belongs to God or a higher power."

Girls, African Americans, Southerners and Protestants are the groups most likely to assign value to faith, the poll found.

Forty percent of girls said religious faith is their most important influence, compared to 30 percent of boys. Among blacks, 58 percent called faith the most important influence, compared to 30 percent of whites and 32 percent of other ethnic/racial groups.

Among other findings of the surveys:

-- Religious belief tends to increase for boys and decrease for girls, the Gallup survey found.

For example, 44 percent of boys age 13 to 15 said their life belongs to God, compared to 53 percent of boys age 16 and 17. For girls, the figures dropped from 55 percent for the younger group, to 42 percent for girls 16 and 17 years old.

-- Thirty-four percent of teens told Gallup pollsters they are "born again."

-- Forty-two percent said they attended religious worship in the previous week.

-- Sixty-four percent indicated they belong to a church, synagogue or other organized religious group.