

Nashville, Tennessee

Associated Baptist Press

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August 11, 1998

(98-60)

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House committee alters RLPA, endorsing coalition fractured

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A U.S. House of Representatives panel has approved a bill that would bolster religious liberty, but only after stripping from the bill a major provision, and dividing supporters in the process.

At a hastily called meeting Aug. 6, the House Subcommittee on the Constitution made changes in the Religious Liberty Protection Act, leaving the bill's supporters scrambling to decide whether they will continue their full support.

Lawmakers removed a provision that relied on Congress' power to regulate interstate commerce, one of three key provisions in the bill. Left intact are the bill's protections under the spending powers and a separate provision to protect religious groups from restrictive zoning laws.

The bill was introduced after the Supreme Court struck down portions of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act in 1997, saying Congress lacked the authority to impose the law on the states.

Like RFRA, the proposed law would protect religious activities by making it harder for state and local governments to pass regulations which happen to burden religious practices.

The change has left the 70-group coalition which helped draft RLPA "fractured," said a leader in the Coalition for the Free Exercise of Religion. However, it appears that most are prepared to support a revised bill rather than no bill at all.

Subcommittee Chairman Charles Canady, R-Fla., said he removed the commerce provisions "reluctantly" because they "presented an insurmountable obstacle to the movement of this bill."

"I'm trying to count votes here," Canady said in an interview. "I don't want to make this bill the enemy of what is possible."

Brent Walker, general counsel for the Baptist Joint Committee, said it was "disappointing to take out the commerce provision, but I think it was impossible to pass while it was in there." He said the coalition will meet Aug. 13 to discuss its response to the changes.

"We want to restore religious-liberty protections as quickly as possible," Walker said. "It's not all that we wanted, but half a loaf is better than no loaf at all."

Michael Farris, founder and president of the Home School Legal Defense Association, was the primary opponent of using the commerce powers to protect religion. Farris' group, which has 58,000 dues-paying families, worked with other groups such as the Concerned Women for America to urge GOP leaders and other members of Congress to oppose RLPA.

Farris said using commerce powers to protect religion would protect only the rich and powerful religions while leaving smaller groups unprotected. He also said it could lead to attempts by the government to regulate parents who home school.

Farris said Canady contacted him a day before the markup and agreed to remove the commerce provision if Farris would withdraw his opposition to RLPA. Farris agreed and has stopped opposing RLPA but also refuses to support it.

Canady said the passage of RLPA out of the subcommittee is "an important step forward in the protection of religious freedom."

"Americans should not be unduly burdened as they exercise their individual faiths; rather, their faiths should be accommodated to the greatest extent possible," he said.

Meanwhile, Rep. Jerrold Nadler, D-N.Y., a primary sponsor of RLPA, criticized the "radical changes in the bill" that came with no warning to members of the coalition. "The unifying principle around which this coalition has been organized ... is that the fundamental right to the free exercise of religion must never be subjected to the prevailing political winds," he said.

Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, criticized the changes in the bill in a letter to Canady. "The resulting bill will not receive the broad-based support that the consensus bill enjoyed."

"We are convinced that many of the very protections intended to be guaranteed by the original Religious Freedom Restoration Act have now been jettisoned," Lynn said. "People whose rights we have all championed are left out in the cold because they do not claim any connection to federal assistance."

Oliver Thomas, special counsel at the National Council of the Churches, expressed reservations about the changes but said most coalition members will be pleased about getting the remaining protections in RLPA approved.

Thomas, who spearheaded the effort of the coalition to pass RFRA, said it is unfortunate that lawmakers, who repudiated the home school group's arguments a week earlier, have conceded to their demands. "A very vocal minority has had a disproportionate impact," Thomas said.

Besides endorsing the modified bill, Thomas said RLPA supporters could push the Senate version of the bill, which still includes the commerce provisions. Another, less likely, option may be to pass a bill that would protect only against local zoning laws.

In addition to the opposition coming from GOP leadership and conservative advocacy groups, some Democrats were concerned the commerce provisions might weaken existing civil-rights laws.

At the panel's markup, Rep. Bobby Scott, D-Va., introduced three amendments that failed but would have clarified that RLPA could not be used to violate welfare, civil-rights and environmental protection laws. RLPA supporters say Scott's concerns are unwarranted.

Lawmakers did add minor changes requested by the U.S. Justice Department that were supported by members of the Coalition For the Free Exercise of Religion.

RLPA was introduced in Congress after the Supreme Court ruled Congress lacked the authority to impose RFRA on the states under a constitutional power granted to Congress under Section 5 of the Fourteenth Amendment. Like RFRA, it is designed to bar state and local officials from substantially burdening religious exercise unless they use the least restrictive means of furthering a compelling interest such as health or safety.

New Kentucky seminary envisioned in Georgetown

By Mark Wingfield

GEORGETOWN, Ky. (ABP) -- After more than three years of talk, plans for a new Baptist seminary in Kentucky are starting to take shape, leaders of the effort have announced.

The Baptist Seminary of Kentucky, which would offer moderate Baptists in the state an alternative to the conservative-controlled Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, hopes to accept its first students in the fall of 1999. It will begin in temporary facilities located at Georgetown Baptist Church. Leaders of the seminary eventually hope to purchase property in Georgetown for a permanent campus.

The seminary initially will offer the master-of-divinity and doctor-of-ministry degrees, said Paul Simmons, chairman of the seminary's board of directors. Simmons, a former professor at Southern Seminary, said the board hopes to launch the school with 50 students and grow to an enrollment of 250 within four years.

A presidential search committee should finish its work within 90 days, Simmons said. Once elected, the new president will further shape the direction of the school's faculty and curriculum.

Although initiated by the Kentucky Baptist Fellowship, the seminary will be owned and governed by its own self-perpetuating board of directors, Simmons said.

Moderate Baptists have talked of starting a new seminary in Kentucky since 1993, when Albert Mohler, a conservative, became president of Southern Seminary. Southern is owned by the Southern Baptist Convention but has been highly connected to Kentucky Baptist churches in the past.

Once considered one of the most progressive Baptist seminaries in America, under Mohler Southern has been transformed into one of the more conservative. More than 80 percent of the seminary's faculty has resigned, retired or been terminated over the last five years. While conservatives hailed the changes, many moderates have lost confidence in the school.

Mohler, however, downplayed any potential impact the new seminary might have on Southern.

"I would expect this proposed new seminary to represent what some liberal Baptists are looking for in a seminary," he said. "Whatever label they may put on it, the seminary will be a liberal alternative to the mainstream conservatism of the Southern Baptist Convention."

Whether all Kentucky moderates will rally behind the Georgetown effort remains to be seen. While many Kentucky pastors support an alternative to Southern, there are differences of opinion over what form it should take.

The particular effort to launch the Georgetown seminary began in 1995, when the Kentucky Baptist Fellowship appointed a committee to explore alternative means of theological education in Kentucky. Simmons, a former professor of Christian ethics forced out at Southern due to the SBC's conservative swing, was named chair of the committee by the state Fellowship's moderator.

That committee later became independent of the Kentucky Fellowship and has expanded to include about 20 people.

The Baptist Seminary of Kentucky will offer a "new and fresh" alternative for students who no longer are attracted to Southern Seminary, said board member Greg Earwood, pastor of Faith Baptist Church in Georgetown.

"Students are looking for a place close to home with strong academics, a nurturing environment for their faith and practical training for ministry," he said.

The Baptist Seminary of Kentucky will offer training both to those called to specific ministry tasks and to laypeople who want further education, Simmons said. "We also will be open to men and women as God leads them to discover their own sense of calling for their personal and professional lives."

Seminary classes will be taught by full-time and adjunct faculty, Simmons said. "We have a lengthy list of persons who've expressed an interest in teaching, including names that would be very recognizable among Baptists."

Although many of the details of how the seminary will operate are yet to be determined, Simmons said he hopes to work out an agreement to use the library facilities of Georgetown College. However, the seminary will not seek any official links to Georgetown College, he added.

Georgetown College President Bill Crouch acknowledged he had been contacted by leaders of the new seminary but said no agreements have been worked out between the college and the seminary.

"Baptist institutions in the commonwealth are responding to the need for fresh initiatives for educating, training and supporting Christian leaders," Crouch said, citing various new programs at Campbellsville University, Clear Creek Baptist Bible College, Southern Seminary and Georgetown's own Marshall Center for Christian Ministry.

"We applaud these and other efforts, and we encourage all people of goodwill and cooperative spirit to join together in the gospel work to which we have been called," he added.

Crouch acknowledged Georgetown College has received "numerous inquiries" about whether it would offer any new graduate programs in theological education. "The only partnership into which Georgetown has entered at this time is with Regent's Park College, the Baptist college at Oxford University in England." Through that program students may earn bachelor's and master's degrees in theology by studying abroad.

For now, the board of the new seminary will focus on naming a president, securing property and raising additional funds, Earwood said.

"I think we're far enough along to say realistically that it can be done. The president's got to do two things: He's got to raise money but he's also got to relate to the churches and bring the churches on board. And that's not by any means entirely financial. That's more being able to say to people, 'Where are you going to send your people who are called by God for seminary training?' and 'Where are you going to go when you need staff people?'"

On the financial side, "money for property is critical at this point," Earwood explained, because the board has a donor who is willing to give "between \$300,000 and \$500,000 if we can match it."

Those funds would go toward purchasing property and covering initial personnel expenses, he said.

To raise this money, the seminary's board and committee will begin major fund-raising efforts across the state within the next two months, Simmons and Earwood said.

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New study links faith with lower blood pressure

By Bob Allen

DURHAM, N.C. (ABP) -- Going to church is not only good for the soul, it might help the body as well.

Several studies have linked health with faith. The latest suggests religious activity helps maintain lower blood pressure in senior adults.

In a study of 4,000 North Carolina residents age 65 and older, Duke University researchers found the faithful were less likely to have high blood pressure than those who didn't participate in religious activities.

People who attended worship services and prayed or studied the Bible at least once a week were 40 percent less likely to have diastolic hypertension, which is associated with heart attacks and strokes, according to the study. The findings hold up even when other factors such as sex, race, smoking and chronic illnesses are taken into account, said Harold Koenig, who co-authored the study.

Koenig, director of Duke Medical Center's Center for the Study of Religion/Spirituality and Health, said researchers aren't sure why religion helps control blood pressure in older people, but he speculated that churches may provide a support system that helps them during stressful times.

"If you cope with stress better, your blood pressure isn't going to be as high," Koenig said.

"Religious people have better support systems which keep them healthier," added Linda George, a Duke sociology professor who co-authored the study. "The sense of meaning and kind of comfort that religious beliefs provide make them more resistant to stresses both physical and social."

While religion had a positive effect on blood pressure in all groups in the study, it was particularly strong in African Americans and in those younger than 75. Koenig said hypertension in the older group is probably more related to poor health than to psychological or spiritual factors.

Researchers conducted the study in three waves in 1986, 1989 and 1992 to confirm that religious activity, and not some unrelated variable, was responsible for lower blood pressures. In each phase, participants were asked to evaluate their own level of religious activity and were monitored for blood pressure and other health factors.

In analyzing the data, researchers accounted for health factors that might prevent people from attending church. "In this way, we were able to rule out the possibility that high blood pressure affected religious participation rather than the other way around," Koenig said.

Researchers also investigated the theory that religious people had lower blood pressure because they were more likely to comply with anti-hypertensive medical treatment. While they did find religious participants more likely to comply, it was not enough to explain the lower blood pressures, Koenig said.

Koenig said the odds of the findings happening by chance were less than one in 10,000.

Herbert Benson, president of the Mind/Body Medical Institute and associated with Harvard Medical School, told Associated Press the Duke study presents further evidence "that belief is inexorably connected to body as body is to mind."

Several earlier studies also have linked faith and health.

-- In a landmark 1988 study, San Francisco cardiologist Randolph Byrd divided 393 patients into two groups and assigned half to be prayed for by Christians. Byrd found those who were prayed for were three times less likely to suffer from congestive heart failure or other complications during recovery than those not prayed for.

-- In a study of patients recovering from complicated medical procedures, patients who received daily and lengthy visits from a chaplain recovered more quickly than those who received only routine visits.

-- A 1995 study at Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center found that one of the best predictors in surviving heart surgery was patients who said they drew comfort and strength from their faith.

-- Studies show that men and women who attend church regularly are half as likely to die from coronary or artery disease than those who rarely go to church. Lower rates of depression and anxiety-related illnesses are found among the faithful.

-- People who don't attend church are four times more likely to commit suicide than regular attenders.

The Duke study was to be published in the August issue of the International Journal of Psychiatry in Medicine.

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Media violence programming kids to kill, military expert says

By Mark Wingfield

JONESBORO, Ark. (ABP) -- Media violence is programming America's children to kill, says a military expert on methods used to train soldiers for battle.

American parents are allowing television, movies and video games to train their children for warfare the same way the Army trains soldiers to kill, according to an article in the Aug. 10 issue of Christianity Today. Dave Grossman, a retired lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Army who directs the Killology Research Group in Jonesboro, Ark., wrote the article, which is adapted from a lecture he gave at Bethel College in Kansas last April.

Grossman approaches the subject from a unique vantage point. His job has been to help military and law enforcement personnel understand the psychology of killing. To do so, he has studied at length what tactics are effective in training humans to kill other humans.

Because he lives in Jonesboro, Grossman became intimately involved in the analysis and counseling conducted after the fatal shooting of four girls and a teacher by two other students at the community's Westside Middle School last March.

What happened there, he says, is symbolic of the larger tide of violence Americans are reaping.

Grossman admits many factors can be cited to explain the increasing level of violence perpetrated by children. However, there is "only one new variable present," he said: "media violence presented as entertainment for children."

"Every parent in America desperately needs to be warned of the impact of TV and other violent media on children, just as we would warn them of some widespread carcinogen," Grossman says.

He cites research published in the Journal of the American Medical Association as evidence that an unquestioned link has been established between watching media violence and perpetrating violence in real life.

A journal article published June 10, 1992, concluded that "the introduction of television in the 1950s caused a subsequent doubling of the homicide rate" and that "long-term childhood exposure to television is a causal factor behind approximately one-half of the homicides committed in the United States, or approximately 10,000 homicides annually."

Grossman moves beyond that evidence to present his own case, comparing how the military has learned to train soldiers in killing to how movies, television and video games condition children to commit violent acts.

Killing is not a natural instinct in the human psyche, Grossman says. "Killing requires training because there is a built-in aversion to killing one's own kind."

Military leaders discovered this barrier earlier this century and set out to "fix" it in soldiers. The plan has been successful, Grossman says, raising the firing rate of soldiers from 15 percent during World War II to 55 percent in the Korean War and to 90 percent in Vietnam.

"How the military increases the killing rate of soldiers in combat is instructive, because our culture today is doing the same thing to our children," he explains. He cites methods used in the military -- desensitization, brutalization, classical conditioning, operant conditioning and role modeling -- and draws parallels to what children learn today from movies, television and video games.

For starters, he says, the overwhelming presence of violence in movies and television programming is desensitizing children's innate aversion to violence. And this starts as early as 18 months of age.

"When young children see somebody shot, stabbed, raped, brutalized, degraded or murdered on TV, to them it is as though it were actually happening. ... And this happens to our children hundreds upon hundreds of times."

Classical conditioning, he continues, is what Pavlov demonstrated by training his dogs to salivate upon hearing the ringing of a bell because they were trained to associate the bell with food.

Early in World War II, the Japanese used classical conditioning to train soldiers to kill. Chinese prisoners were placed in a ditch with their hands bound behind them. Select Japanese soldiers then ran the Chinese through with bayonets while the watching soldiers cheered. Everyone was treated to a fine meal and "comfort girls" afterward. Thus killing became associated with a reward of pleasure.

"This technique is so morally reprehensible that there are very few examples of it in modern U.S. military training; but there are some clear-cut examples of it being done by the media to our children," Grossman contends.

"Our children watch vivid pictures of human suffering and death, and they learn to associate it with their favorite soft drink and candy bar, or their girlfriend's perfume."

Another technique, operant conditioning, is the process of developing in humans a stimulus-response connection through repeated practice, Grossman explains. For example, this is why schools conduct fire drills; during a real fire panic might set in, but if children have been conditioned how to respond, they will do the right thing even amid panic.

In a negative vein, this is what happens when a child plays a violent video game, Grossman says. Every time a child plays an interactive point-and-shoot video game, he is learning the exact same conditioned reflex and motor skills as a soldier or police officer in training, he contends.

Finally, movies and television are providing children with violent role models who serve the equivalent purpose of boot camp drill sergeants, Grossman adds.

What should parents do then? Grossman outlines several options, including turning off the TV, infringing on civil liberties and increasing gun control. Each of these options is fraught with additional peril and may not be realistic, he concludes.

He encourages parents not to expose their children to violent TV and movies and not to let children play violent video games.

But the most effective and immediate solution for society, he contends, is to confront "the producers and purveyors of media violence."

"Simply put, we ought to work toward legislation that outlaws violent video games for children," he says. "There is no constitutional right for a child to play an interactive video game that teaches him weapons-handling skills or that simulates destruction of God's creatures."

Parents and concerned Christians should hit the producers of violent movies, television and video games in the wallet, he suggests.

And the evidence linking media violence to social violence is so strong that court cases ought to arise, he adds, suggesting that juries soon may bring judgment against sellers of media violence just as the tide has turned against manufacturers of tobacco products.

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