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In this issue:

- Religious leaders divided in reactions to Clinton scandal
- Clinton's morality should be measured by public acts, as well as private, author says
- North Carolina pastor named Baptist paper editor

Religious leaders divided in reactions to Clinton scandal

By Bob Allen

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Religious leaders were divided in early reactions to President Bill Clinton's revelation of an inappropriate relationship with Monica Lewinsky.

Leaders of the Religious Right, who in the past have differed with Clinton's policies, called on the president to resign in the wake of the scandal. Clinton supporters in the religious community, meanwhile, called for understanding and support.

In a televised speech Aug. 17, Clinton, who two days later turned 52, confessed to an inappropriate relationship with Lewinsky, 25, and to misleading the public and his family about it.

However, the president insisted he did not break the law when he earlier denied under oath that he had a sexual relationship with the former White House intern. He also called for an end to a 4-year-old independent counsel investigation which Clinton said has pried into his private life.

Seven months after publicly denying an affair, Clinton told the nation: "I did have a relationship with Ms. Lewinsky that was not appropriate. In fact, it was wrong. It constituted a critical lapse in judgment and a personal failure on my part for which I am solely and completely responsible."

Earlier in the day, Clinton testified four-and-a-half hours before a federal grand jury, during which he reportedly admitted to having an intimate relationship with Lewinsky but refused to answer questions regarding specific acts.

In his 5-minute address to the nation, Clinton also said he regretted misleading the public in previous statements in which he strongly denied having a sexual relationship with Lewinsky.

"I know that my public comments and my silence about this matter gave a false impression," Clinton said. "I misled people, including even my wife. I deeply regret that."

Clinton said answers he gave when asked in a January deposition about his relationship with Lewinsky were "legally accurate" but "did not volunteer information."

"But I told the grand jury today, and I say to you now, that at no time did I ask anyone to lie, to hide or destroy evidence, or to take any other unlawful action," he said.

Clinton said his earlier comments were motivated by "several factors" including "a desire to protect myself from the embarrassment of my own conduct" and concern for his family. "The fact that these questions were being asked in a politically inspired lawsuit which has since been dismissed was a consideration, too," he said.

He also cited "real and serious concerns" about independent counsel Kenneth Starr's investigation which began looking into the Whitewater land dealings which took place 20 years ago, moved into questions about Clinton's staff and friends and then into the president's "private life."

Clinton said Starr's investigation "has gone on too long, cost too much, and hurt too many innocent people."

"Now this matter is between me, the two people I love most -- my wife and our daughter -- and our God," Clinton said. "I must put it right, and I am prepared to do whatever it takes to do so. Nothing is more important to me personally. But it is private. And I intend to reclaim my family life for my family. It's nobody's business but ours. Even presidents have private lives."

While opinion polls immediately after the speech indicated most Americans were satisfied with Clinton's remarks and believed he should continue as president, his criticism of the Starr investigation did not sit well in conservative political circles or with some clergy.

Rob Schenk, general secretary of the National Clergy Council, accused Clinton of "blame shifting" by drawing focus to the Starr investigation. "When one makes a confession of this nature, there is room for only one in the confession," he said. "To bring anyone else in the conversation at that point is to engage in blame shifting."

At a press conference during an Aug. 18 roundtable discussion sponsored by the clergy group, Schenk suggested Clinton should have said something like: "I have sinned against God and against the American people and I beg your pardon. Good night."

Another panel participant, Richard Land, executive director of the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, described Clinton's address as "more combative than contrite, more angry than apologetic and more concession than confession."

"The president missed an enormous opportunity in his address to the nation," Land said. "Instead of drawing us together, President Clinton polarized the nation anew with his short and insufficient address."

But Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, disagreed with those who argued Clinton's statement did not go far enough.

"What we heard last night was an appropriate response by a public official to an admission of wrongdoing," Lynn said during the roundtable. "The question of whether he has confessed his sin is an issue that we will only know if we ever talk to those who are in a pastoral relationship or when we reach Heaven and can discuss the matter with God himself."

"Last night was as close as the United States of America comes to a public confession," Lynn said. "We don't have a systematic way to have public confessions in this country. And I think we should treat the matter no differently than we would in that hypothetical where I noticed that not a single panelist suggested that after the person came in for pastoral counseling, they as pastors would suggest that they obtain a space for a press conference the next day in order to respond to the allegations. And I think we should expect and require no more of the president in his time of trouble and sin than we would of anyone who would come be our counselee in a similar time of crisis."

Other critics of the president included Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, a former Baptist pastor and past president of the Arkansas Baptist State Convention, who disputed Clinton's claim that the affair was a private matter. "Either Bill Clinton lives under different rules than the rest of us, or America has a different set of values than when it reacted to Wilbur Mills, Bob Packwood, Gary Hart, Jim Bakker, Jimmy Swaggert and others," said Huckabee, a Republican.

Southern Baptist Convention President Paige Patterson said the president's statement reflected the "obvious materialism and moral decadence of America."

"We now have a president who has admitted that he lied to his family, his friends and his country under oath and that he has been sexually involved with a White House intern young enough to be his daughter," said Patterson, president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C. "To the president, I urge, look to Jesus for forgiveness, and you have our prayers. To Americans who say that the economy is all that matters, I simply remind you that God judges nations when they abandon his moral principles."

Other clergy, however, offered support for Clinton. Joan Brown Campbell, general secretary of the National Council of Churches, issued a "pastoral response" indicating "sadness" about "human frailty" and belief in a God who "judges with unclouded vision and responds with understanding love -- a model for our human lives."

"Our long experience in pastoral care has taught us the wisdom of protecting personal life from public display," Campbell said. "I hope that, as a nation, we are now learning that truth."

Welton Gaddy, executive director of the Interfaith Alliance, urged religious leaders "not to play politics with personal or public tragedy and to refrain from arrogant and self-righteous judgment."

"Our scriptural prophets and messengers remind us that every occasion of sin is an opportunity for an experience of mercy," said Gaddy, an ordained Baptist minister.

Robert Parham, executive director of the Baptist Center for Ethics, took a middle position. Parham chastised Clinton, saying the president "has cast away his moral authority" with "reckless personal behavior and abuse of power."

Instead of simply throwing stones, however, Parham said Christians should set an example for the nation by praying for the Clintons and others hurt in the process.

"The president and others need our prayers more than our pious criticism," Parham said.

Parham said "difficult questions" must now be faced about Clinton's future ability to lead. He challenged Christian leaders to exercise "moral discernment" by evaluating in nonpartisan and realistic ways whether Clinton "can recover the moral authority of the presidency."

"If the Christian community sets the moral example and shows moral wisdom and courage, we can hope that moral character will find traction in the midst of the nation's disappointment and sadness," Parham said.

Before facing the grand jury and the public, Clinton sought comfort from civil-rights leader Jesse Jackson, a Baptist minister who has counseled the president in the past.

According to the Washington Post, Jackson visited the White House after First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton told him that the Clintons' 18-year-old daughter, Chelsea, wanted to talk.

Jackson said he and the Clintons shared an evening of conversation and prayer, in which the president found solace in Psalm 51, a chapter on contrition for sin.

"He has a great sense of shame and regret," Jackson said, "but having said that, the question is how you handle faith in a storm."

Several religious leaders who have been frequent critics of Clinton, including Gary Bauer, Jerry Falwell and the Christian Coalition's Randy Tate, said the president should resign after his admission.

That sentiment was echoed even among some Clinton supporters.

Wayne Ward, a retired seminary professor who once served as Clinton's pastor, said the president should step down to save himself and his family from further humiliation.

"I feel like it would be good to remove his family and himself from the eye of the storm," Ward told the Louisville Courier-Journal. "I just know with the turmoil he's been through, it would be good."

Ward, 77, a retired professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., said he has known the Clintons since the 1970s. He grew closer to them when he served as interim pastor of Immanuel Baptist Church in Little Rock, Ark., where President Clinton is a member, during the 1980s, when Clinton was governor. The Clintons also went on a study tour of Israel with Ward and his wife in the early 1980s, he said.

Ward said he stood by Clinton during the scandal, hoping it would prove to be just a vicious rumor. "We kept hoping maybe that it wasn't true," Ward said. "We've cried a lot, prayed and prayed for him and Hillary."

In January, when rumors of the affair broke, Ward said he faxed Clinton, saying, "Bill, if it's true, then say it to God, Hillary and the American people and let them handle it."

"And I said, 'If you're not guilty, then please fight it with all you've got, and we'll stand by you,'" Ward recalled.

Rex Horne, Immanuel's current pastor, was unavailable for comment immediately following Clinton's speech, according to a spokesperson.

In a television interview before Clinton's speech, Philip Wogaman, senior minister of Foundry United Methodist Church in Washington, where the Clintons regularly worship, said Clinton had not done anything nearly as bad as when King David arranged the death of his lover Bathsheba's husband. "And King David, if I read my Bible correctly, was not impeached," Wogaman said.

-30-

-- Kenny Byrd contributed to this story. Other information was obtained from news reports in ENI and Baptist Press.

Clinton's morality should be measured by public acts, as well as private, author says

By Bob Allen

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- President Clinton may have committed an immoral act, but that doesn't necessarily mean he's an immoral person, argues Baptist author and interfaith leader Welton Gaddy.

Gaddy, executive director of the Interfaith Alliance, said many Clinton critics conclude the president is "immoral" because he admitted to an improper relationship with a former White House intern.

"Yes, that is an immoral act," Gaddy said. But Gaddy said the president's morality should be measured not just by his private acts but also by his public policies.

"His moral lapse, moral failure, as an individual does not discount some of the very moral positions to which he has given leadership in other dimensions of his presidency," Gaddy said.

Gaddy said the public response to Clinton's admission has ranged from "mean-spirited condemnation" to "uncritical acceptance" and "a disturbing apathy." He said those trying to assess the president's moral character should look at the larger picture.

"Let's don't define morality so narrowly that only personal concerns count and at the same time let's not define morality so broadly that personal moral concerns don't count," Gaddy said. "Personal character is important, but so is social character, and there are moral elements to both of those."

Gaddy is former pastor at Northminster Baptist Church in Monroe, La. He is current president of the Alliance of Baptists and a member of the Coordinating Council of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

He has written more than 20 books, including "Adultery and Grace," in which he challenges religious people who treat adultery as if it were an unpardonable sin.

"Certainly adultery is wrong," Gaddy said in an interview, "but it is a wrong that stands alongside other wrongs and should not be singled out as kind of the litmus test for a person's moral nature."

Gaddy's book on the subject is subtitled "The Ultimate Scandal."

"I define the ultimate scandal as a failure to extend grace to a person caught up in all the negatives of a sinful situation," Gaddy said. "Though adultery is wrong, so is that judgmental spirit that refuses to extend grace to the person who has been involved in adultery."

Some studies have estimated that 75 percent of American men and 50 percent of American women have been involved in adulterous behavior. Other statistics indicate lower percentages. Gaddy said he conservatively estimates that two out of every three American families has at one time or another been affected by adulterous behavior of a spouse, child, parent or sibling.

He said he believes one factor in Clinton's high approval rating despite allegations of moral failure -- along with the strong economy -- is that so many people are able to empathize with the first family's predicament.

"If that statistic has credibility, it means when these families read those charges, one of their instinctive actions would be to be in touch with the pain they felt in that kind of situation and to say to themselves, 'We don't need to beat up on him; there is enough hurt,'" Gaddy said.

Some people who were willing to accept the fact that Clinton would have an affair were nonetheless disturbed that he would lie about it. Gaddy said similar feelings are common in families affected by adultery.

"Most counselors who work with couples who have been through an episode with adultery say the biggest hurdle to overcome is not the infidelity. It is the lack of honesty," Gaddy said.

"I think that's what we're seeing played out on a national stage," he said. "There can be that lapse where there is marital infidelity, but once you establish a pattern of behavior in which honesty does not have primary value, everything is up for grabs."

Gaddy also said religious leaders should not try to evaluate Clinton's statement as to whether it meets their standard for a legitimate "confession."

"The very nature of a person's confession is that it be personal, which means unique to that individual," he said. "So when you start critiquing the choice of words, intonation, display of mood, then you've moved away from saying he's making a personal confession."

Gaddy said Clinton's choice of words was likely guided by their context of a supposedly confidential grand jury investigation in which information damaging to Clinton had previously been leaked.

"This whole process of investigation has taken on the flavor of a media event more than a pursuit of justice or an honest expression of religious faith and morality," he said.

"When the president made his statement he made that in the context of a media event," Gaddy said. "I'm not willing to say, and I don't think anyone can say, that what he said to the American people would be the same thing he would say to his wife and daughter or to his pastor or in a private prayer of confession before God."

"I personally don't think the nation ought to expect he would say the same things to us that he would say in those other contexts."

Gaddy also said he would pose several questions to religious leaders who are beginning to call for Clinton's resignation.

"From a political perspective, are people asking him to resign people who have been wanting him out of office anyway? That's a very telling consideration," he said.

Beyond that, "If there's a genuine concern for whether he can continue to exercise leadership as president, then that deserves more careful evaluation," Gaddy said. "There's no question the strength of his leadership has been weakened."

"From a Christian perspective," Gaddy said, "to say he should resign because of this flies in the face of the promise of the gospel, as far as I'm concerned."

"Every occasion of sin is an opportunity for an experience of grace," Gaddy said.

"The whole thrust of the gospel is an occasion of sin does not have to define your life forever. There is promise beyond that. To say to someone in the situation of moral failure, 'Well, that automatically means you're through,' seems to me to fly in the face of the essence of the gospel."

-30-

North Carolina pastor named Baptist paper editor

BURLINGTON, N.C. (ABP) -- North Carolina pastor Tony Cartledge has been chosen as next editor of the Biblical Recorder, news journal of the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina.

Cartledge, pastor of Woodhaven Baptist Church in Apex, N.C., will succeed current editor R.G. Puckett, who retires Dec. 31.

Don Bolden, chairman of the 60,000-circulation weekly paper's board of directors, announced Cartledge's election Aug. 17. Bolden said search for a new editor has been underway since March, when Puckett announced his impending retirement, and was conducted across several states.

"We wanted to find the individual who was best suited to meet the needs of the Recorder and North Carolina Baptists in the years ahead," Bolden said. "We are delighted we found that person in our own neighborhood."

He said Cartledge brings considerable experience in the area of communications and extensive knowledge of North Carolina Baptist life to the post.

He is best known outside the state for commentaries he writes for Smyth and Helwys' Formations Sunday school curriculum which are published in the moderate newspaper Baptists Today.

Puckett, an outspoken moderate, often has been criticized by conservatives in North Carolina and the Southern Baptist Convention.

Cartledge is also a moderate. His church is affiliated with both the Southern Baptist Convention and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, a moderate group which offers alternatives to official programs of the conservative-controlled SBC.

But the announcement of his hiring played down denominational politics. "We bring Tony Cartledge to this post, not as a moderate or a conservative, but as a Baptist editor of the Biblical Recorder," Bolden said.

Bolden said Cartledge should not be compared to Puckett, 65, who has been an editor 40 years and is the only person ever to edit Southern Baptist papers in four different states.

Bolden described Puckett as "a legend in Baptist journalism."

"We do not ask Tony Cartledge to be another Gene Puckett. That is impossible," Bolden said. "We do ask the new editor to set his own direction in serving North Carolina Baptists."

The editor-elect will join the Recorder on Oct. 1, and he will work with Puckett until the end of the year when the transition is complete.

Cartledge, a native of Georgia, received a bachelor of science degree from the University of Georgia, where he graduated magna cum laude.

He earned a master of divinity degree at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary and a doctor of philosophy degree at Duke University.

Cartledge did mission work in Indonesia in 1971, and held pastorates in his native state and North Carolina before becoming the pastor of Woodhaven, a young suburban church, in December 1988.

Cartledge currently serves on the North Carolina convention's general board, where he is the vice chair of the Christian life and public affairs council.

He is married to the former Jan Rush. They have two children; another daughter was killed in an automobile accident caused by a drunk driver.

Puckett has served as editor of Baptist papers in Ohio, Maryland and North Carolina. Before that, he was associate editor in his native Kentucky. While in Maryland, Puckett volunteered his services as managing editor to help launch the New England Baptist and the Penn/Jersey Baptist for the new state conventions in those areas. He was a founding director and later served as board chairman of Associated Baptist Press, an independent news service based in Jacksonville, Fla.

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-- By ABP staff

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