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Editor: Greg Warner
Associate Editor: Bob Allen
Phone: (904) 262-6626
Fax: (904) 262-7745

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Truthfulness requires commitment, discernment, ethics professor says

By Lacy Thompson

NEW ORLEANS (ABP) -- With President Clinton's recent admission that he misled the American public and reports of journalists who made up and borrowed material, some might say lying has become a way of life.

In a materialistic, secular, pluralistic culture, truth is relative. What matters is getting one's way. Right?

Wrong, says Joe Trull, professor of Christian ethics at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. Definitely wrong.

"As Christians, we believe there is an objective truth," Trull said in an interview. "In the Bible, truth is rooted in the being and nature of God. Not only is God true in all he does, but God is truth."

In contrast, the Bible describes Satan as "the father of lies" and contains numerous accounts where deception is judged. "Lying and living a lie are in opposition to the way of God, the nature of God, the character of God," Trull said.

To honor God, the Christian should both speak and live the truth, Trull said. "Truth is a moral way of life. It's a way of living. ... We who are the children of God should be like God, not only telling the truth but living the truth, walking in the truth, doing truth and being truth."

"In a sentence, those who live and speak the truth demonstrate the character of God," Trull said.

That is the ideal, the way God intended for human beings to live and relate to one another, Trull said. But humans are not perfect. The reality is that a life of total truthfulness is hard to attain. Sometimes people lie. Sometimes they deceive themselves and others. "But that's what Christian growth is about, eradicating these elements of self-deception and deception of others that keep us from being like God wishes us to be," Trull said.

In addition, life sometimes forces individuals to make difficult choices. Sometimes, the choice really is between two evils. Christians who hid Jews during the Holocaust learned this -- should they lie to save a life?

Throughout church history, the question of whether it is ever permissible to lie has been debated. Some -- like Augustine -- said no. Others -- like Martin Luther -- said yes.

The Bible seems to indicate there are instances when a lie is permissible, Trull said, citing the account of Rahab hiding the Israelite spies and the midwives lying about the birth of Hebrew males. "But I think the key word

is permissible," he emphasized. "It doesn't mean it's right. It's never right, but it may be the best you can do in situations."

For instance, persons tell any number of trivial or "loving" lies, he noted. They may compliment a mate even when the person does not look his or her best. They may respond to a word of greeting by saying they are fine even when they are not.

In such instances, the person is not trying to deceive another but to respond in a kind and loving way, Trull said. And this may extend to not telling all of the truth you know. Being truthful does not mean one has to tell all persons all the truth, he said. Some things are better left unsaid.

Conversely, by choosing words carefully, people sometimes say things that are technically true but are intended to deceive.

"If you're deceiving someone even in telling the truth, that's a lie," Trull said. "Because that's the point of lying -- it's a deliberate deception."

And dishonesty is only rarely the best policy, Trull said.

"If lying is permitted as a necessary evil or an allowable evil, it is only in the most exceptional circumstances and for the best of reasons. It's unique. It's rare. It's when two high values conflict, one of which is telling the truth but the other which might be saving a life," Trull said.

"The real key is the motive. The motive has to be not your own selfish interest but someone else."

Too often, Trull said, people lie for selfish reasons.

"I heard someone say that the trouble with half truths is that we get hold of the wrong half, which means that when we tell a half truth, we're not standing on the truthful half but on the deceitful half. We're trying somehow to justify our deception, which is usually self interest."

Ironically, only a person who is living a life of truthfulness can have the discernment to know when a loving lie may be appropriate, Trull said. "If you're making a habit of telling lies and living a lie, then it's going to be pretty hard for you to discern."

It also is going to be pretty hard for such a person to offer a Christian witness to the world -- at a time when such a witness is desperately needed, Trull noted.

"Deep down, I think we all have a desire to be truthful and moral. But the pressure of the world is so intense. ... And in that context, it is particularly important for us as Christians to show people that Christian principles are right and workable."

In the first century, Christians were known by their way of life that set them apart from the rest of society. Centuries later, Trull said, "We've lost that distinction."

To regain that distinction, Trull said Christians should commit themselves to living lives of truthfulness, regardless of the what the rest of society is doing. He cited the vow of Joshua in the Old Testament, as an example: "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

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Baptists respond to floods in Bangladesh, China

McLEAN, Va. (ABP) -- Baptists joined with other Christians from around the world to help provide disaster relief for victims of floods in Bangladesh and China.

Baptist World Aid, relief arm of the Baptist World Alliance, which has already sent \$35,000 to two Baptist groups involved in relief efforts in Bangladesh, renewed its appeal for funds Aug. 31.

Officials in Bangladesh say the floods are the most prolonged on record, causing massive damage to crops and infrastructure. About 60 percent of the country is flooded, affecting 20 million people. More than 400 people have died.

BWAid is seeking funds to provide emergency food, clothing and medicine, said Paul Montacute, director. With world media attention focused elsewhere, Montacute said he fears few people are aware of the situation in Bangladesh.

"Our Baptist brothers and sisters in Bangladesh need our help in sharing Christian love, in a very practical way, with the mainly Muslim population," he said.

BWAid also recently sent \$5,000 to China, where two months of flooding has caused an estimated 240 million people to suffer.

The Amity Foundation, a 13-year-old relief organization associated with China's officially recognized Protestant organization, the China Christian Council, is coordinating church relief efforts in China.

"The disaster in China is of a nation-wide nature, now extending to 28 provinces and regions, along the Yangtze River and its tributaries as well as lakes and other rivers from the southwest to the northeast," said Amity head Wenzao Han, according to Britt Towery, a retired Baptist missionary who has communicated with Han by e-mail.

Government reports attributed more than 3,000 deaths to the floods, which forced about 13.8 million people from their homes.

An estimated million people were living in hastily built shanties on river dikes, with little food or clothing of their own.

By late July, Amity had contributed the equivalent of \$250,000 U.S. dollars for grain, clothing, blankets and other basic supplies for people in the hardest-hit areas and hoped to raise another \$2.5 million for distribution over the next three years, Towery reported.

Also in response to the need, two veteran Texas Baptist Men disaster-relief volunteers left Aug. 13 for the city of Wuhan in central China, carrying water purification equipment and 200,000 two-gallon plastic bags to hold purified water. The project was launched at the request of local officials in China and was facilitated by an American Christian studying in that area, according to Baptist Press.

Mel Goodwin of Kilgore, Texas, and Jim Pinkston of Edgewood, Texas, took two water-purification units purchased with \$24,000 from the Southern Baptist World Hunger Fund, said Bill Cashion, a Southern Baptist hunger and relief consultant. The two portable units are capable of purifying up to 15,000 gallons of water per day.

An additional \$10,000 released from the World Hunger Fund will buy food and medicines to combat hunger-related and water-borne diseases.

The plastic bags will give people a clean container for the purified water. The bags are sealed with a tie on which a message is printed in English, "a cup of water in Jesus' name," a Bible reference from Matt. 10:42.

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-- By ABP staff

Retired social-work dean lending hand to Baylor

WACO, Texas (ABP) -- Anne Davis, founding dean of the Carver School of Church Social Work at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, will work as a consultant for a new master's program in social work at Baylor University.

Davis, who retired in 1995 after 25 years at the seminary in Louisville, Ky., will assist Preston Dyer, director of Baylor's division of social work, and Diana Garland, coordinator of the master's in social work program, in developing the new graduate social-work program.

Baylor officials say the graduate program, slated to begin in 1999, is the only one of its kind in a Baptist or mainline Protestant school. Baylor is a Baptist university located in Waco, Texas. The new graduate degree will allow social-work students to specialize in a number of areas, including religious organizations, faith communities and other professional settings.

Davis, who will also serve part time as director of operations for Waco's Advocacy Center for Crime Victims and Children, said she moved from Kentucky to Texas in her retirement because she wants to invest herself in the Baylor program.

"I think Baylor is on the right track and I would like to give Baylor the experience that I have," Davis said.

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-- By ABP staff

25-year missionary takes seminary post

ABILENE, Texas (ABP) -- A 25-year missionary in Indonesia has joined the faculty of Hardin-Simmons University's Logsdon School of Theology.

Rob Sellers, a career missionary in student ministries and theological education for the Southern Baptist International Mission Board, has been named associate professor of missions at the school in Abilene, Texas.

Sellers has taught Christian ethics at Indonesian Baptist Theological Seminary in Semarang and Jakarta and the Indonesia branch of Asia Baptist Theological Seminary. He also taught English at Indonesian Teachers College and Diponegoro University, both in Semarang. Earlier in his career, he and his wife, Janie, were consultants for youth ministry with the Union of Indonesia Baptist Churches.

Vernon Davis, dean of the theology school, said Sellers' experience of working in a different culture will help students "understand and meet the challenge of missions and ministry throughout the world."

Sellers recently has been a visiting lecturer in Baylor University's religion department and the George W. Truett Theological Seminary while missionary in residence at the seminary and at First Baptist Church of Waco. His two children, Tyler, 19, and Marnie, 18, both attend Baylor.

A native of West Palm Beach, Fla., Sellers is a graduate of Mississippi College with a master's and a doctorate from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Sellers will also hold the Connally chair of missions at Hardin-Simmons. University Chancellor Jesse Fletcher is relinquishing the Connally chair but will continue to teach part time.

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