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Evangelism unites SBC conservatives, despite differences, Patterson says

By Mark Wingfield

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- There will be no rift between Southern Baptist conservatives who are not Calvinists and those who are Calvinists, so long as both work together on the task of evangelism, Paige Patterson said at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Sept. 10.

"There are many things about the doctrine of election we may disagree about ... but I believe we can agree on this: We must do our best to get the gospel to all people," said Patterson, president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C.

Patterson, who also is the current president of the Southern Baptist Convention, came to the campus of his sister seminary to address a topic some observers have thought could rupture the alliance of conservatives now in control of the SBC.

Patterson does not adhere to all five points of the theological system known as Calvinism. But Albert Mohler, president of Southern Seminary, does.

Two points generally separate the Calvinists and non-Calvinists among Southern Baptists:

-- Election. Calvinists believe God predetermined before the beginning of time who could be saved, meaning by inference that God created some people knowing they would go to hell. Non-Calvinists emphasize human will, asserting that God desires for all people to be saved but humanity's sinful condition prevents all from accepting salvation.

-- Grace. Calvinists believe God's grace leading toward salvation is so compelling that those who have been predestined to be among the elect will inevitably choose God. Because of this "irresistible grace" mixed with the doctrine of election, Christ's sacrifice on the cross is effective only for the elect, according to Calvinists. Non-Calvinists, because of their affirmation that all people have the potential to be saved and the choice of whether to trust in God, believe God's grace can be rejected.

The printed title of Patterson's message was "Southern Baptist Conservatives and the Doctrine of Election."

The message was similar to one he delivered at Southeastern Seminary's convocation Aug. 27.

The press, Patterson said, often has tried to paint Southern Baptist conservatives in one of two ways: as a group absolutely uniform in their thinking or as a group fractured internally over the doctrine of election.

"The truth of the matter is we do disagree on some things," he said.

In his message based on Romans 8:28-29, Patterson said election is a doctrinal issue that must be dealt with but is a matter that cannot be fully understood by humans. "There are matters we don't understand," he said, citing the Trinity as another example.

Anyone who approaches the topic of election honestly, he said, must do so in the context of all of Scripture, not just in the context of selected Bible verses. Further, anyone who elevates a particular view of the doctrine of election over the importance of the salvation message found in the gospel is in error, he added.

Rather than asking how to resolve conflicting views over election, Baptists should ask why God put the doctrine in the Bible at all, Patterson said.

He cited four truths he said must be acknowledged as long as the doctrine of election is in the Bible:

-- That "the act of salvation is of God from beginning to end and man can make no contribution."

-- That "once we have been saved we can never again be lost."

-- That there is a "providential oversight of God in the life of his children."

-- That God guarantees history will not be out of his control.

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Patterson and Mohler call for Clinton's resignation

By Pat Cole

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- Bill Clinton should resign the presidency for the sake of his own personal life and the benefit of the nation, Southern Baptist Convention President Paige Patterson said Sept. 10 in Louisville, Ky.

He reiterated statements made earlier in the week in North Carolina and reported in the national media.

Patterson, president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C., was in Louisville to speak in a chapel service at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

"My first concern is President Clinton himself," Patterson said in a news conference after the chapel service. "At this particular time in his life, he needs to have as much time alone as he possibly can to rebuild his relationship with God and his walk with God."

In addition, Patterson said Clinton should resign to have time to restore his relationship with his family.

Clinton's resignation would save both the president and the nation from humiliation, Patterson said. The president should leave office voluntarily so that "we would not have to walk through some hearings, impeachment hearings, that by the nature of the case would be terribly embarrassing to the president, terribly embarrassing to the Congress and terribly embarrassing to the United States of America."

Patterson said he is concerned that Clinton's moral failures and those of other high-profile people in America are having a detrimental affect on children.

"My concern is that you have a sitting president who is using the home that you and I provide for him in Washington, D.C., to seduce a girl young enough to be his daughter," Patterson said. "If what we hear is believable, it may not be the only case of this."

Patterson said the situation is worsened because Clinton has made statements that he later had to repudiate in sworn testimony.

"He doesn't tell the truth," Patterson said. "So now you not only have the problem of the sex scandal, you have the problem of integrity. To me integrity is in many ways a more serious issue."

Patterson was asked if U.S. Rep. Dan Burton of Indiana should resign also. Burton recently admitted to an adulterous relationship 15 years ago that resulted in the birth of a son.

"I do not know the situation there, so I can't speak to it," Patterson said. "What I would say is that any congressman, any senator, any president, anybody who works in a situation like that, who is guilty of continuing sin while he's in that office, needs to resign and rebuild his life."

Patterson said he did not know if Burton had taken steps to change his lifestyle.

At the news conference, Southern Seminary President Albert Mohler joined Patterson in asking for Clinton's resignation. However, Mohler said the most serious aspect of the crisis surrounding Clinton is spiritual rather than political.

Mohler repeated his earlier call for Clinton's church, Immanuel Baptist in Little Rock, Ark., to exercise church discipline on Clinton. He said Clinton has engaged "in a persistent pattern" of sin. "And the New Testament calls upon the church to make that a matter of congregational concern."

Asked if Clinton should confess his sins before the church, Mohler replied, "That would be a good start."

Mohler said the purpose of church discipline is "not retribution but restoration." Asked what should happen if Clinton refused to seek restoration, Mohler answered by saying the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 5 instructed the church at Corinth to "cast out" a man who persisted in sexual immorality.

"The church is made up of sinners saved by grace but not sinners who persist in sin," Mohler said.

Patterson said he agreed with Mohler's call for Immanuel Baptist to discipline Clinton.

"You will find in 1 Timothy 5 the instructions concerning those in leadership," Patterson said. "It is said that the church is to deal with them in public so that all may learn to fear."

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Southeastern Seminary faculty defend sister school's president

By Bob Allen

WAKE FOREST, N.C. (ABP) -- Faculty members at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary have issued a statement defending the president of a sister school against criticism in a newspaper editorial.

Faculty at the school in Wake Forest, N.C., signed a Sept. 8 "citation of thanksgiving and appreciation" for Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

The citation criticized the Kentucky Baptist newspaper Western Recorder and its editor, Mark Wingfield, for an editorial attacking an earlier commentary by Mohler which criticized President Bill Clinton's home church for failing to punish him for marital infidelity.

In their statement, Southeastern faculty members lauded Mohler for "loving Jesus and the Bible more than you love comfort and political correctness" and for "loving President Clinton and the president's local church sufficiently to call upon them to honor the God of all the earth by practicing what God prescribed in the Scriptures as acceptable behavior for individuals and for churches."

"We thank you for your courage and love in this matter even when you knew that persons such as Editor Wingfield and others would misrepresent your motives," the statement continued.

In an Aug. 24 commentary for Religion News Service, Mohler criticized Immanuel Baptist Church in Little Rock, Ark., for failing to "exercise any semblance of church discipline" amid recent revelations of an affair between Clinton and a former White House intern.

Clinton is a member of the Little Rock church, where he attended regularly and sang in the choir when he was governor of Arkansas in the 1980s. Now he most often attends a Methodist church in Washington.

"Southern Baptists will be watching the Immanuel Baptist Church in Little Rock to see if it musters the courage to make clear its own convictions," wrote Mohler, who recently authored a chapter on church discipline for the book "The Compromised Church."

In a Sept. 1 Western Recorder editorial, Wingfield accused Mohler of meddling.

"Al Mohler apparently thinks he knows more about how a certain Arkansas church ought to handle its business than that church itself knows," Wingfield wrote. "That's not only arrogant, it runs against the Baptist doctrine of the autonomy of the local church."

While admitting the paper has frequently criticized Mohler's leadership in transferring the seminary from moderate to conservative control, Wingfield said "the editors of this paper would not think of telling his church it ought to exercise church discipline on him."

In an unusual response, the faculty of Southern Seminary adopted a resolution Sept. 3 defending Mohler and his "call for the reinstatement of church discipline."

In an interview Sept. 10, Wingfield said he does not believe he misrepresented Mohler's motives. He accused Southern Seminary's public relations staff of "conducting a national media campaign to intimidate Immanuel Baptist Church" by circulating Mohler's commentary to newspapers.

Wingfield said he finds it "amusing" that "I am such a threat to the president of Southern Seminary that it requires the faculties of two SBC seminaries to take formal action to castigate me."

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LBJ, not Jefferson, behind ban on church politicking, prof says

By Mark Wingfield

WEST LAFAYETTE, Ind. (ABP) -- The reason churches are prohibited from endorsing political candidates has much more to do with Texas politics than with the United States Constitution, according to a sociology professor at Purdue University.

"The ban on electioneering has nothing to do with the First Amendment or Jeffersonian principles of separation of church and state," James Davidson writes in the September 1998 issue of the Review of Religious Research. "The reason churches cannot endorse or oppose political candidates is that churches are tax-exempt organizations and must abide by the Internal Revenue Service code."

Davidson contends in the scholarly journal that nothing in the Constitution prohibits churches from endorsing or opposing candidates for political office. Further, he asserts, the courts "have never used Thomas Jefferson's celebrated 1802 metaphor about 'a wall of separation between church and state' to stifle churches' support of or opposition to political candidates."

Rather than violating requirements for the separation of church and state, the danger churches face in endorsing or opposing political candidates is revocation of their tax-exempt status, Davidson says.

Churches receive tax-exempt status as 501(c)(3) organizations under the IRS code. That means churches are not required to pay most taxes and people who make contributions to churches may count those gifts as tax deductions.

The IRS code in Volume 1:856 stipulates that 501(c)(3) organizations must not "participate in or intervene in (including the publishing or distributing of statements) any political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) any candidate for public office."

This has been a prominent issue during recent election years, especially as conservative evangelical churches and para-church ministries have voiced support or opposition to particular candidates over their positions on abortion, homosexuality and other issues. While only a few churches actually have been charged under this portion of the IRS code, para-church organizations including the Christian Coalition have been accused of violating the ban. Pat Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network recently paid a fine to the IRS to settle a case concerning electioneering in violation of the tax code.

A Baptist authority on religious liberty who read Davidson's paper said he believes Davidson has "overstated matters."

"Thomas Jefferson was powerfully opposed to political churches and religious parties -- the European way," said James Dunn, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee in Washington. "To say the ban on electioneering has 'nothing to do' with 'Jeffersonian principles' is a stretch."

"What is technically legal is often morally wrong and a violation of principle," Dunn added. "Overall, however, Davidson has done us all a favor by addressing the issue. Churches can endorse or oppose all they like if they don't care about their tax exemption."

In his article, Davidson traces the history of the portion of the tax code that prohibits 501(c)(3) organizations from endorsing or opposing candidates. It all stems, he says, from the efforts of Lyndon Baines Johnson to get re-elected to the U.S. Senate in 1954.

On July 2 of that year, Johnson proposed an amendment to a bill revising the tax code. That amendment, adopted by the Senate without discussion, inserted the language prohibiting 501(c)(3) organizations from endorsing or opposing candidates.

Johnson's intent was not to muzzle churches, Davidson argues. Rather, his immediate concern was silencing non-profit political organizations that were challenging his bid for re-election.

"There is no reason to believe the amendment had anything to do with churches and their political activities," Davidson writes. "In personal correspondence ... George Reedy, Johnson's chief aide in 1954, said he is 'confident that Johnson would never have sought restrictions on religious organizations.'"

It just so happens, Davidson suggests, that churches and religious organizations fall in the same IRS classification as Facts Forum and the Committee for Constitutional Government, two anti-communist organizations which at the time were opposing Johnson. Facts Forum was founded by the Texas millionaire H.L. Hunt; the Committee for Constitutional Government was founded by publishing magnate Frank Gannett.

Also in the mix in 1954, Johnson was working to hold off McCarthyism both in Texas and Washington, but especially within the Texas Democratic Party, Davidson says. The Texas governor at the time, Allan Shivers, was a powerful ally of Sen. Joseph McCarthy.

"If Johnson could put an end to Facts Forum's partisan support for McCarthy and Shivers, and stifle any involvement in his own race [for re-election,] he could challenge the political right on a national level, improve loyal Democrats' chances in the Texas primary and serve his own political interests all at the same time," Davidson writes.

The result, he says: "Churches were not banned from endorsing candidates because they are religious organizations; they were banned because they have the same tax-exempt status as Facts Forum and Committee for Constitutional Government, the right-wing organizations Johnson really was after."

The tax code could be changed, if enough support were found to do so, Davidson notes. But he concludes that is unlikely to happen, in part because most pastors "know that getting involved in partisan politics would create religious conflicts and, in some faith groups, might cost them their jobs."

Church autonomy, community a difficult mix, Culpepper says

By Mark Wingfield

GEORGETOWN, Ky. (ABP) -- Balancing the Baptist understanding of the autonomy of the local church and the biblical call for Christian community is no easy task, Alan Culpepper told a Georgetown (Ky.) College audience Sept. 8.

For evidence, he said, look no further than the strain felt by Immanuel Baptist Church in Little Rock, Ark., as Baptist leaders from outside the church have called on the congregation to discipline its most visible non-resident member, Bill Clinton.

Culpepper, dean of the McAfee School of Theology at Mercer University's Atlanta campus, delivered a scholarly lecture on the importance of community to inaugurate the new George Walker Redding Lecture at Georgetown College. During a question-and-answer time, the first question asked connected Culpepper's lecture to the Immanuel Baptist Church issue.

Although Culpepper didn't make the connection in his formal presentation, he responded to the question. Culpepper was baptized in the Little Rock church as a child.

"We have a responsibility for others, but we have to be careful in the ways in which we intrude in someone's life," Culpepper said.

In a recent article, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary President Albert Mohler criticized Immanuel for failing to exercise "church discipline" against Clinton in light of moral failures including an admitted affair with a former White House intern. Other denominational leaders have since echoed Mohler's sentiment.

But Culpepper, a former professor at Southern Seminary and Baylor University, said such demands from denominational leaders are inappropriate.

"To stand long distance from a situation and call on another church to exercise discipline when a person is hurting is irresponsible," he said.

Yet this is "the kind of situation we all face" in reconciling the need for community with other aspects of the Christian life, Culpepper said. "Being community can be messy."

Creating and sustaining a sense of community also is challenged by the need to accept diversity, he added in response to another question.

"Diversity is the challenge to real community," he said, noting that creating community does not require uniformity.

In his prepared lecture, Culpepper contrasted stories of rugged individualism that have shaped the American identity with stories of community found in the Bible.

Because of the emphasis on individualism found in their culture, American Christians face an uphill struggle to embrace the biblical concept of community, he said. Yet the Bible "offers a different way" than the way of the culture.

"Entering community means revisiting the personal and cultural stories ingrained in all of us," Culpepper said. "One way leads to the wilderness and one way leads to community."

The new lecture series at Georgetown College honors the Baptist school's longtime professor of Scripture and religion, who died in 1989. Redding served on the college faculty 30 years.

Culpepper delivered two lectures in the new series Sept. 8, one before a general chapel audience and another before a dinner meeting of the college faculty.

Associated Press doubles its religion-reporting staff

By Pam Parry

NEW YORK (ABP) -- The Associated Press, the world's largest news-gathering organization, has named two new full-time religion writers, doubling its personnel devoted to religion coverage.

The new AP religion writers are Richard Ostling, senior correspondent with Time magazine specializing in religion coverage, and Julia Lieblich, national correspondent for Newhouse News Service specializing in religion and ethics. Both writers will work out of AP's New York office, the news service announced Sept. 3.

The two veteran journalists were hired to fill a vacancy created earlier this year when religion writer David Briggs left AP to work for the Cleveland Plain Dealer.

Ostling told Associated Baptist Press the move indicates that religion is "an important and big beat that American newspapers want covered and covered well."

Ostling said this is not a "new direction" but an "upgrade" for AP, which has had a reporter dedicated to religion coverage for 47 years.

AP's first religion specialist, George Cornell, pioneered the beat for the news service in the early 1950s. Beginning in 1951, Cornell's religion columns were "the first regular religion feature ever carried by a news wire service," according to an AP biographical sketch.

Briggs and Cornell overlapped briefly during a transition before Cornell retired, Ostling said, but the recent appointments mark the first time in its 150-year history that AP has hired two permanent religion writers. He said the new writers will be giving the same kinds of religion coverage as Cornell and Briggs but more of it.

Ostling, an award-winning reporter, said religion is no more important to American society today than a half century ago, but the news media have only gradually come to realize how important it is to their readers. Meanwhile, Ostling said, the "better news organizations have become more sophisticated in many areas of specialized coverage." For example, business coverage has become more in-depth at many newspapers across the country, said Ostling, who joined Time in 1969.

Lieblich, who holds a master's degree in theological studies from Harvard Divinity School, said she made the move because she wanted to cover news as well as features.

"I was impressed by AP's commitment to increasing its religion coverage so that we can do the analytical pieces and in-depth feature stories while we cover breaking news," said Lieblich, who wrote a book about nuns published by Ballantine Books in 1992.

She said people are interested in issues of spirituality and organized religion, as well as the interplay between religion and politics that has been brought to the forefront by groups like the Moral Majority and Christian Coalition.

Lieblich, who has written free-lance religion pieces for publications including The New York Times Magazine and Life, said she believes the interest in religion has been there all along, and now the coverage is following.

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-- Pam Parry is a free-lance writer in Alexandria, Va.

New magazine examines religion in news media

By Pam Parry

HARTFORD, Conn. (ABP) -- A magazine launched this summer examines how stories involving religion are reported by the news media.

Supported by a grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts, Religion in the News magazine is published three times a year by the Center for the Study of Religion in Public Life at Trinity College in Hartford, Conn. The premiere issue (June 1998) examined preachers and the Clinton scandal, Promise Keepers, religion and the post-welfare state, charitable choice, the McCaughey babies, Islam in Virginia and more.

"Religion has, in short, become a major topic of discussion in the American public square," wrote Mark Silk in his first editor's column. "The purpose of Religion in the News is to track the discussion through the news media."

"As this first issue makes clear, our interest is not confined to the coverage of religion per se," continued Silk, who came to the Trinity center in 1996 after working for the Atlanta-Journal Constitution. "Was Pope John Paul II's trip to Cuba a 'religion' story? It was that and more."

The publication is part of a larger effort funded by a \$895,000 grant that will also undergird educational projects and conferences.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: For information about subscribing to Religion in the News, call (860) 297-2353.

Cross-carrying evangelist completes his pilgrimage

NORTH FORT MYERS, Fla. (ABP) -- Florida evangelist Arthur Blessitt has completed his 29-year ambition to carry a 12-foot cross to every nation on earth.

Blessitt, 57, of North Fort Myers, Fla., completed a walk Sept. 1 in North Korea, the 277th and final country on his pilgrimage which began in 1969.

"Jesus did it, and it is all for the glory of God," said Blessitt, who said he started the effort in response to a call from God.

Blessitt has been arrested 24 times while walking 32,580 miles. He has walked with Billy Graham, met Pope John Paul II and been welcomed to Beirut by Yasser Arafat. He is listed in the Guinness Book of Records for the "world's longest walk."

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-- By ABP staff

National Baptist leader admits to 'improper relationship'

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. (ABP) -- National Baptist Convention president Henry Lyons has admitted to an "improper relationship" with a woman with whom he faces federal charges of racketeering and fraud.

According to news reports, Lyons and Berniece Edwards, a former convention employee, asked for forgiveness from the convention's board after they acknowledged a lengthy relationship. Accused of misusing church funds, Lyons and Edwards were indicted in July in Florida on federal charges of extortion, fraud and money laundering.

While denominational leader E.V. Hill told Associated Press the board forgave Lyons, others in the convention called for his resignation.

"At this point, if Dr. Lyons had any love left for himself and the National Baptist Convention, he would step down," said Charles Kenyotta, a pastor in New York.

During a Sept. 7 news conference, Lyons admitted he had not always provided "sterling leadership" but said the denomination has progressed and that he plans to run for a second 5-year term in 1999.

Hill said the board would continue to support Lyons because he has not been convicted of a crime, according to Religion News Service.

Lyons and Edwards are accused of stealing millions of dollars from the convention. The allegations became public last year after Lyons' wife, Deborah, set fire to a \$700,000 home in St. Petersburg, Fla., that Lyons had purchased with Edwards.

Deborah Lyons first told investigators she acted in anger after finding evidence that her husband was having an affair but later recanted, saying she had been misunderstood.

Lyons faces 56 federal charges including extortion, bank fraud, mail fraud, wire fraud, and money laundering. He will also be tried on state racketeering and grand theft charges. He faces a possible sentence of 815 years and \$25 million in fines.

Edwards faces 25 counts of fraud, tax evasion, conspiracy and money laundering.

Lyons is the longtime pastor of the Bethel Metropolitan Baptist Church in St. Petersburg.

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-- By ABP staff

Fighting in the Congo forces missionaries out

VALLEY FORGE, Pa. (ABP) -- Civil war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo has disrupted the work of American Baptist missionaries there, according to American Baptist International Ministries officials in Valley Forge, Pa.

Two American Baptist missionaries remained in the country, according to a Sept. 2 report by American Baptist News Service. Missionary doctor Bill Clemmer remained in Vanga, while missionary Glen Chapman was in Kikongo.

Other missionaries were evacuated the last week in August, and new missionaries headed for the Congo were redeployed to other locations.

Clemmer, a doctor at Evangelical Hospital in Vanga, reported that both the Vanga and Kikongo areas remain calm and that neither he nor Chapman have sensed any anti-American feelings.

"[Congolese] church leaders have asked us to take courage and not leave," he said. "This affirms our own belief that our presence is helpful not only for the local work, but in part to sustain the greater work and image of the body of Christ in Congo."

Leaders from neighboring countries and the United Nations met for a two-day peace conference in Ethiopia, aimed at working out a cease fire and withdrawing foreign troops. Rebels in the country are trying to oust President Laurent Kabila and the year-old government.

"We are praying that the conflict will end so our missionaries and their families can safely return to the Congo," said American Baptist official Donna Anderson, associate executive director of International Ministries. "However, we understand that we are dealing with God's timetable, and not our own. We continue to uplift our missionary families, as well as our Congolese brothers and sisters, in our prayers. We ask you to do the same."

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