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In this issue:

- **Clinton discusses 'rock bottom truth' with religious leaders at breakfast**
- **Clinton woes prompt debate about redemption, judgment**
- **Independent counsel report delays religious-liberty bill**

Clinton discusses 'rock bottom truth' with religious leaders at breakfast

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Having faced the "rock bottom truth" about his relationship with a former White House intern, an emotional President Clinton told a group of religious leaders Sept. 11 he had repented and asked for their prayers and help "in healing our nation."

Clinton's remarks were delivered at an annual White House prayer breakfast, just hours before the public release of Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr's report detailing allegedly impeachable offenses related to the president's acknowledged relationship with intern Monica Lewinsky.

"I don't think there is a fancy way to say that I have sinned," Clinton told the religious leaders.

"It is important to me that everybody who has been hurt know that the sorrow I feel is genuine," Clinton said, mentioning his family, friends, staff, Cabinet, Lewinsky and her family and the American people.

"I have asked all for their forgiveness," he said.

Clinton said he agreed with critics who said he had not been contrite enough when he acknowledged the relationship with Lewinsky in a televised speech Aug. 17.

Besides sorrow, he told the religious leaders, forgiveness requires two things.

"First, genuine repentance a determination to change and to repair the breaches of my own making," he said. "Second, what my Bible calls a 'broken spirit' an understanding that I must have God's help to be the person that I want to be, a willingness to give the very forgiveness I seek, a renunciation of the pride and the anger which cloud judgment, lead people to excuse and compare and to blame and complain."

Clinton said he will instruct his attorneys to mount a vigorous defense, but he quickly added that legal language "must not obscure the fact that I have done wrong."

He pledged to "continue on the path of repentance" and to "intensify my efforts to lead our country and the world toward peace and freedom, prosperity and harmony."

The religious leaders applauded when Clinton told them "if my repentance is genuine and sustained, and if I can maintain both a broken spirit and a strong heart, then good can come of this for our country as well as for me and my family."

"The children of this country can learn in a profound way that integrity is important and selfishness is wrong," he said. "But God can change us and make us strong in the broken places. I want to embody those lessons for the children of this country."

He asked the religious leaders to "share my prayer that God will search me and know my heart, try me and know my anxious thoughts, see if there is any hurtfulness in me and lead me toward the life everlasting."

Clinton's confessional tone struck a responsive chord with religious leaders attending the session.

"I think that the president made a real confession," said Daniel Weiss, general secretary of American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A. "It was sincere, it was contrite, it followed biblical standards."

"The man asked sincerely for forgiveness from God, from his family and the country," he added. "My conviction is that if a person confesses his sins, God is faithful to forgive our sins."

Welton Gaddy, a Baptist minister and executive director of the Interfaith Alliance, said he was deeply moved by what the president said.

"But you have to understand that when people confess, I assume that they are telling me truth," Gaddy said on the "Newshour with Jim Lehrer."

Baptist Joint Committee Executive Director James Dunn said that after Clinton's remarks and reporters were escorted from the East Room, persons of all faiths offered support to President Clinton, Hillary Clinton and Vice President Al Gore.

"For over an hour, friends and enemies, harsh critics and ardent supporters, crowded around the first couple to assure them of their prayer," Dunn said.

Joan Brown Campbell, general secretary of the National Council of the Churches of Christ said the prayer breakfast was a "religious event in the best sense of the word, not just people saying prayers, but an event with a prayerful quality about it."

Campbell said she thanked the president "for being honest and willing to be vulnerable. It's not easy for powerful people to be vulnerable."

For the nation to heal, Campbell said, "there may have to be a kind of public reprimand."

Clinton's ability to continue to lead, she said, "is not something we know and it won't be determined so much by politicians or Mr. Clinton as by the American people."

Austin, Texas, pastor Gerald Mann concluded the portion of the event open to the press by praying for the Clintons and "for all of us here who lead the community of faith. When we leave here, it will be easy to join the ranks of those who holler and those who hate and those who hurt."

"It is only, only by thy grace that we can join the ranks of those who heal," Mann said. "And Father, remind us of the old, old adage: The only difference between a sinner and a saint is that one's found forgiveness; the other one ain't."

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Clinton woes prompt debate about redemption, judgment

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- As they are on a host of topics, Baptist leaders are divided over how to respond to President Clinton's transgressions with former White House intern Monica Lewinsky.

Some leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention, the president's denomination, have not been bashful about calling for Clinton to resign or for his home church, Immanuel Baptist Church in Little Rock, Ark., to enforce some form of church discipline for the president's moral lapses.

But others, including Baptist Joint Committee Executive Director James Dunn, Interfaith Alliance Executive Director Welton Gaddy and American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A. General Secretary Daniel Weiss take a less judgmental stance.

Two of those calling on the president to resign are current Southern Baptist Convention President Paige Patterson, president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C., and Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

Patterson and Gaddy differed sharply Sept. 11 in assessing President Clinton's remarks to religious leaders at a White House prayer breakfast.

Patterson told viewers of "The Newshour with Jim Lehrer" that President Clinton is a "serial liar" and that the president "needs to step down."

"He is no longer able to lead the free world aggressively and effectively, and the other nations are not going to follow his leadership," Patterson said.

Gaddy disagreed, suggesting that a leader who rightly deals with a frailty can be strengthened in character and have an enhanced capacity to lead.

It comes down to whether "we want a leader that becomes sensitive and compassionate because of having been through that kind of valley, or do we have to have a leader who is free and perfect and if that's the case, we're in trouble," Gaddy said.

Gaddy said the president's actions "were wrong to the core," but he should be given the "opportunity to be a leader in a brand new sense of confessing his wrong and of showing us that there is hope beyond wrongdoing."

Patterson said the issue is not whether offenses are impeachable but a question of character.

"Unless we return to heroes in the country that are men of character, whether in public office, in sports or in the ministry, we are going to destroy the family and hence our nation also," Patterson said.

Gaddy acknowledged that the president did some things that "represent poor judgments of character."

But it would be "equally tragic, though, if we come down on the president in a way of judgment that suggests that none of us has reason to be penitent as well," he said. "And if the discussion about justice in this case uses a man's personal tragedy to advance partisan political purposes, that is an even greater tragedy."

Dunn also took issue with Patterson and Mohler's call for the president to resign.

"Like all Americans, Baptists are hurt and saddened by the president's actions," he said. "No one I know condones those actions. But at the same time, many Baptists are troubled when leaders who, ignoring their own sins, pretend to have the moral stature to call for the president's resignation or the authority to instruct a local congregation about how to treat one of its members."

Dunn insisted it is "not condoning sub-Christian behavior to insist upon aspiring to the Gospel goal of amazing grace. It's obvious that not everyone who sings 'Amazing Grace' extends it."

Weiss said he thinks "everyone is disappointed in Clinton's behavior."

But he added that among Baptists, the "tendency is to try to be as compassionate and forgiving as possible. I'd rather err on that side than on the side of judgmentalism."

Weiss warned that certain moral issues should not be singled out to the exclusion of others.

"There is an epidemic of self-righteousness that seems to be pervading our country that I find quite odious," he said.

Dunn said Americans "need to learn that morality is not simply sexuality."

"The Clinton presidency has been exceedingly moral when it comes to economic justice, the pursuit of peace, care for children, advocacy of education and religious liberty," he said.

Weiss noted that many have expressed concern about how Clinton's actions are impressing the nation's children.

"I'm concerned about that but I am also concerned about 25 million children living in poverty that the president also seems to be concerned about," Weiss said.

In the end, Dunn said, "ultimate judgment is God's business. I'll not trample on God's turf."

Independent counsel report delays religious-liberty bill

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A House Judiciary Committee session to vote on a bill designed to bolster religious liberty was postponed Sept. 10 after a much-anticipated report by Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr was referred to the panel.

The Religious Liberty Protection Act would bar state and local governments from unnecessarily interfering with religious practices. The bill was approved by the House Constitution Subcommittee after lawmakers stripped RLPA's protections relying on Congress' power to regulate commerce.

The changes were made to appease conservative groups such as the Home School Legal Defense Association and Concerned Women for America, which charged that the commerce provisions would only protect the powerful religions and would be an inappropriate constitutional tool to protect religion.

A staffer on the Judiciary Committee said that "everything is at a standstill" at the moment because of a "major constitutional crisis" involving the Starr report.

The House committee will determine if impeachment hearings are necessary after reviewing the report, which details possible impeachable offenses, including charges of perjury, obstruction of justice, suborning perjury and abuse of power against President Bill Clinton. The charges surround Clinton's admitted "inappropriate relationship" with former White House intern Monica Lewinsky.

The committee aide said that the markup of RLPA, as well as other legislation pending in the committee, may be postponed for only a week. "I don't think you can conclude that these bills will be abandoned," the aide said.

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-- By Kenny Byrd

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