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## **Are Clinton's Baptist roots to blame for sex scandal?**

By Bob Allen

NEW YORK (ABP) -- President Clinton's moral failure and his handling of the resulting scandal can be explained in part because he is a Baptist, according to a recent article in a major news magazine.

"To understand Clinton the president, you have to meet Bill the Baptist, a believer whose faith leaves plenty of license," said a subheading to a Nov. 2 Newsweek article titled "Sex, Sin and Salvation."

"Bill Clinton -- both the public and the private man -- cannot be fully understood without grasping the nuances of his Baptist upbringing," wrote Newsweek religion correspondent Kenneth Woodward.

Woodward noted that Clinton's speaking style is reminiscent of Baptist sermons, and that his policies on abortion and school vouchers echo the views of former Baptist spokesmen who fought the Roman Catholic Church over those issues.

"But Clinton's troubled personal life -- and his repeated verbal evasions -- also bears a distinctive Baptist stamp," the article continued.

Woodward wrote that Baptists believe that once saved, a person cannot go to hell, even if he keeps on sinning. "There's no way you can get right with God by doing good," James Dunn, head of the Baptist Joint Committee, told Newsweek. "We do good, not in order to be saved, but because we have been saved."

Woodward also credited Clinton's Baptist upbringing with his belief that "what he does in private is nobody's business but the Lord's." The article quoted Baptist historian Glenn Hinson. "When the president told the nation that his problems were between himself, his family and 'our God,' that was a very Baptist statement," said Hinson, a professor at Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond.

Finally, Woodward contended, "Bill was also schooled in the Baptist tradition of freedom of conscience -- including matters of sex." He quoted Dunn on the Baptist distinctive of "soul competency," which allows Baptists to interpret the Bible for themselves. "The only Baptist creed," Dunn said, "is, 'Ain't nobody but Jesus going to tell me what to believe.'"

"For full-blooded youths like the adolescent Clinton, these Baptist doctrines offered considerable room for maneuvering through the sexual revolution of the 1960s," Woodward wrote.

For some Baptists, that meant the rationalization attributed to Clinton -- that anything short of full sexual contact did not count as adultery, the article said. "What he did is disgusting, but not what I would consider

adultery," Foy Valentine, retired executive director of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission is quoted as saying. "And I think that most Baptists would agree."

Baptist leaders responding to the article said it did not characterize the beliefs or morality of most Southern Baptists.

David Gushee, an ethics professor at Union University in Jackson, Tenn., said the article makes "broad generalizations" about Southern Baptist life. "As soon as we generalize, ... we are going to paint with too broad a brush," he said.

In an Oct. 30 letter to Newsweek, Daniel Vestal, coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, said the article "unjustly caricatured Baptists as Christians with few, if any, moral convictions."

While Baptists have championed religious freedom and individual accountability, Vestal said, "At the same time, Baptists have looked to the lordship of Christ and the authority of Scripture as the moral and spiritual compass for our lives."

"If you look into the hearts of the Baptists I know, you will find neither legalists nor libertines," Vestal said. "Our freedom in Christ does not mean license to do as we please, but freedom to be faithful and obedient to God in every area of our lives, both public and private."

Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, said the article validates concerns behind a 20-year "conservative transformation" of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Moderates who led the convention during Clinton's early political career and continue to support this policies "have become his Baptist enablers," Mohler wrote in a column released to several media outlets.

"Newsweek has demonstrated conclusively the kind of theological and spiritual influences that produce a Bill Clinton," Mohler wrote. "In the Southern Baptist Convention, the rejection of those leaders produced a revolution. Only time will tell if the nation is ready to accept 'Bill the Baptist' as Clinton the President."

But Gushee, a conservative who formerly taught at Southern Seminary, said he would not blame any moral problems of the president on moderates.

Baptists' emphasis on salvation by faith alone can be distorted into a "cheap grace," in which moral living doesn't matter, Gushee said. "As an ethicist, I have always been aware God was taking a big risk with us when he offered salvation in that way."

But the damage of cheap grace shouldn't be pinned "only on moderate Southern Baptists," Gushee said. "That is a deeply rooted problem that cannot be assigned to one group."

Baptists have always been strong in evangelism but less effective in discipleship, or leading believers to follow Christ's teachings and example, Gushee said. While there always have been "pressures" and expectations about leading a moral life, Baptists offered little structure or training for discipleship, he said.

Gushee said he also disagrees with Foy Valentine's definition of adultery, which would exclude Clinton's actions with Monica Lewinsky. Such a definition is "very troubling," he said, because it is based on "an act-oriented legalism -- you define certain acts as crossing the line." But adultery is infidelity of the body and heart, which Gushee described as "a more covenantal understanding" of marriage and adultery.

Gushee said the moral failings of Clinton, as a high-profile member of the denomination, do damage to the Baptist witness. But he said the highly polarized reaction to Clinton's scandals also hurts Baptists' image.

One the one hand, he said, you have a small group of "uncritical apologists" who gloss over Clinton's actions.

"On the other hand, you have the totally predictable attacks from the other side," he said. "It's hard to hear any grace note at all ... [or] any anguish over a struggling brother."

Gushee said public statements from both sides "seem linked to pre-existing political convictions."

## **Baptists begin ministry to hurricane victims**

(ABP) -- Baptists in the United States and around the world are pitching in with other relief organizations to help victims of Hurricane Mitch in Central America.

The hardest hit countries were Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala. An estimated 7,000 people died in the storm, including an estimated 1,000-1,500 villagers buried by mudslides at the foot of Nicaragua's Casita volcano.

The International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention released \$23,500 for storm relief in Honduras, where about 600,000 people, or 10 percent of the population, were forced to flee their homes. The money will help buy food, clothing and medicine which will be distributed by the Honduras Baptist Mission and the Honduras Baptist Convention, according to a Nov. 3 press release.

Baptist World Aid has released an initial grant of \$5,000 to help storm victims in Honduras, according to Paul Montacute, director of the relief arm of the Baptist World Alliance, a worldwide fellowship of Baptists based in McLean, Va.

The initial grant was in response to a direct request from Roberto Rodriguez, president of social work for the Baptist Convention of Honduras.

The Baptist aid organization is making a worldwide appeal for funds for hurricane relief, Montacute said, noting that available BWaid emergency funds are low because of a number of recent severe disasters around the world.

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-- By ABP staff

## **Chinese Christians ask U.S. delegation for 'accurate portrayal' of their situation**

NEW YORK (ABP) -- Christians in China are "terribly offended" at reports of widespread religious persecution in their nation, said the leader of a mainline United States religious delegation recently back from an 8-day visit to China.

Chinese Christians asked the 7-member delegation from the National Council of Churches "to advocate for a more accurate portrayal of their situation," said Joan Brown Campbell, the ecumenical organization's general secretary.

Particularly damaging, Campbell said, are accusations that people who attend China's registered churches aren't really Christians. "That's so insulting," she said. "Of course they are real Christians."

"Are there regulations to be observed by churches in China?" she asked. "Yes, and by all organized bodies. Are the regulations onerous and restrictive? Sometimes. Many of them we would not accept in our country. Are laws guaranteeing religious freedom unevenly applied? Yes."

But overall, Campbell said, the group witnessed Oct. 8-15 a Chinese church marked by rapid growth and increasing vitality. "These people deserve our support," she said.

The delegation's program included briefings by the China Christian Council and discussions with the U.S. Embassy officials in Beijing. They visited Yenjing Seminary in Beijing and had meetings with top Chinese officials and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. They were received by Chairman Li Ruihuan of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and Yeh Xiaowen, director general of the Religious Affairs Bureau.

Over and over, Campbell said, Chinese Christian leaders told the group, in effect, "Are you listening to us? Do you not see our growth? We are doing the best we can. We are running to catch up!"

China's Protestant Christians numbered about 700,000 in 1949. When the Cultural Revolution struck in 1965, "the church disappeared for more than 10 years," said Albert Pennybacker, NCC associate general secretary for public policy and a member of the delegation. "Its leaders were taken into custody. Its church buildings were confiscated and closed."

"At the end of that terrible period, a Christian community emerged committed to self-governance, self-propagation and self-support," he said. "Now the China Christian Council tells us that they count 11 million Christians, 12,000 registered churches and at least 25,000 'meeting places,' which may use private homes."

In Nanjing, the NCC delegation worshipped in Mochou Church, where Ambassador Andrew Young, another delegation member, preached to 4,000 people on the theme of "God's Amazing Power of Love." At the end of the service, people crowded four rows deep around the altar rail and knelt in passionate prayer.

In Beijing the delegation attended a jam-packed mid-week worship service in an "unregistered" meeting place -- a three-room private home in a crowded working class area.

"People from the neighborhood come at 8:30 a.m. three days a week to sing hymns, study the Bible and pray," Young said. "One of the hymns they sang said, 'The Kingdom of God shall triumph in spite of the weakness of little churches like this.' We had the feeling of being in the early church, as described in the Book of Acts."

Chinese Christians "didn't deny the serious persecution during the Cultural Revolution," Young said. "They said one of the reasons the church grew so after the Cultural Revolution was because during it, Christians didn't turn in their neighbors. They suffered themselves rather than implicating others."

"The moral example they set during the Cultural Revolution was the key to their evangelism and propagation after the Cultural Revolution. That's a story you never hear," he said. However, stressed Victor Hsu, NCC director for East Asia and the Pacific, who staffed the delegation, both the China Christian Council and the government officials the delegation met admitted repeatedly that there were problems in the implementation of the religious regulation during this decade.

"When we talked with Christian leaders," Pennybacker said, "they spoke of problems between a growing church and a developing government and country. They spoke of regional problems where 'ultra-leftists' remain in positions of power. However, they emphasized their government's commitment to religious freedom for all.

"They talked of China's commitment to the rule of law and its value for the churches, in spite of sometimes the inadequate administering of laws in their large and varied country. But consistently they denied that persecution was widespread or an intentional government policy."

The NCC delegation raised two particular cases with government officials.

They advocated the release from prison of Father Su Zhimin, a 65-year-old Roman Catholic bishop who has spent off and on a total of 20 years in prison and reported to have been subjected to abuse while in prison.

They also sought increased tolerance of groups such as one that has come to be known as "The Shouters."

"In China the image of religion, from Buddhism and Taoism, is quiet meditation," Young commented. "The Shouters believe if you're not hysterical you're not saved. We made the point that there's a place in Christian experience for that kind of emotional religious expression."

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-- By ABP staff

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