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- * Questions about death penalty raised at Texas Baptist conference
- * Baptist futurist predicts change as post-modernism takes over
- * Louisiana considering religious-liberty measure
- * Baptists in greater Washington realizing dream of seminary
- * Texas upbringing translates into 44-year missions career

Questions about death penalty
raised at Texas Baptist conference

By Ken Camp

AUSTIN, Texas (ABP) -- False convictions, racial bias and inconclusive evidence about deterrence should lead believers to question the death penalty and the way it is carried out in the United States, said a seminar leader at the annual statewide conference of the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission.

There is no clear evidence demonstrating that capital punishment is a better deterrent to violent crime than imprisonment, said Curtis Freeman, associate professor of Christianity and philosophy at Houston Baptist University. But there is abundant evidence that the state sometimes mistakenly executes prisoners for crimes they did not commit, he maintained.

Just prior to the Feb. 8-9 conference in Austin, Anthony Porter was released from Illinois' Death Row 17 years after his conviction for double murder, when investigative journalists proved his innocence.

Freeman said offenders are much more likely to be executed if they are poor and black than if they are wealthy and white. He noted that 89 percent of capital prosecutions are non-Anglo, and 60 percent of the inmates on Texas' Death Row are non-white.

Freeman said the New Testament is silent on capital punishment except for one unclear reference to "the sword" of government in the 13th chapter of Romans.

The principle of "an eye for an eye" in the Old Testament was meant to be remedial, not ideal, Freeman said. Its intent was to limit the escalation of violence by vengeful families, he explained, and its application was tempered by calls for mercy.

In the New Testament, Jesus called his disciples to a "higher righteousness" of self-giving,

reconciling love and forgiveness, Freeman said. In light of that higher calling, he offered several suggestions for modern-day Christians:

-- "Challenge cultural assumptions with gospel truth." Freeman urged Christians to wrestle with death-penalty issues through the study of Scripture and prayerful, informed dialogue with other believers.

-- "Foster spiritual disciplines that sustain the practice of forgiveness."

-- "Advocate for punishment alternatives that provide for reconciliation and restoration." Christians should lead the way in exploring alternative forms of sentencing such as restitution, moving from retribution to restorative justice, he said.

"The Justice of God" was the theme of Texas Baptists' 1999 Christian Life Commission conference at Austin's First Baptist Church. Seminar leaders explored the theme's biblical basis and its implications for Christian living.

Being in relationship with God means taking up the cause of the poor and oppressed, said Ruth Ann Foster, assistant professor of Christian scriptures at Baylor University's George W. Truett Theological Seminary.

"Biblical justice is not impartial. It shows partiality to the oppressed and the marginalized," she said.

Dan McGee, professor of religion at Baylor University, identified five meanings of justice in light of Scripture:

-- Equality. The ideal is equal treatment under the law. However, the goal of equity sometimes demands special consideration for circumstances.

-- Merit. Giving people what they earn and granting them what they deserve is another biblical meaning of justice. Distinguishing between justice and revenge, McGee added, "The purpose of God's retributive justice is to restore, reclaim and heal."

-- Worth. Sometimes justice means giving more to those who are of greater value to the community or society, McGee said, observing that the principle "can get dicey." When special attention is given to a gifted student to help him achieve his potential for the good of society, or when an organ recipient is selected for a transplant on the basis of his value to the community, these are examples of justice based on worth.

-- Faithfulness. Keeping faith and honoring agreements is an essential element of God's covenant and his expectations for his people. "Promise keeping is something others deserve from us," McGee said.

-- Need. In order to achieve the just goal of equality, sometimes preference must be given to those with special needs. Biblical justice focuses especially on the needs of the vulnerable, weak and defenseless, McGee noted.

-30-

Baptist futurist predicts change
as post-modernism takes over

By Steve DeVane

RALEIGH, N.C. (ABP) -- People will become less interested in the theological debates

that have dominated the Southern Baptist controversy in the past 20 years as society moves from the modern to the “post-modern” era, a North Carolina futurist believes.

Cassidy Dale, the director of the Office of Research for N.C. Baptists, is believed to be the only trained futurist working in denominational life.

Dale graduated in 1996 from the University of Houston at Clear Lake with a master of science in studies of the future. He said that in the 23-year history of the program he is the first to go through it with the intention of using his training to help churches.

Most graduates of the program work for city planning departments, NASA or other government agencies.

Dale said current trends illustrate changes that will take place as society moves from the modern to the “post-modern” era. The post-modern era includes a new culture of religious thinking that has arisen in the 1990s, he said.

Terms such as fundamentalist, conservative, moderate and liberal are modern terms that don’t apply to post-modern people, he said. “They have no interest in those lines of thinking or in those theologies,” he explained. “We have no post-modern Christian theology yet.”

Post-modern people also can’t be pigeonholed as traditional or progressive. “They have an entirely different understanding of the world,” he said.

That difference does not mean churches cannot reach post-modern people, however. “The post-modern mindset is extremely God-friendly and will be with us for a long time,” Dale said.

Dale said churches need to understand that post-modern people are looking for community, stories and spirituality.

They want “a real, authentic, deep, intricate, rich community with other believers,” he said. It will be more than just a group of people who meet for church on Sunday mornings, he added.

Post-modern people look for stories because they don’t identify with membership in a group, he said. “Instead they are asking, ‘What is the story of my life and what is the story of my faith journey?’”

Congregations need to understand that they are “a particular people, in a particular situation, with a particular call, heading for a particular destination,” he said. “Churches with the clearest idea of their story are the churches post-modern people will want to affiliate with.”

In their spiritual quest, post-modern people are searching for “a mysterious spirituality rather than a rational religiousness,” Dale said.

“A lot of churches don’t have much to say on the topic of mysterious spirituality or the Holy Spirit,” he said. “And so many people turn to other religions or beliefs in an attempt to find God.

“Churches look at New-Agers and others and ask, ‘What is wrong with them?’ My question is, ‘What is wrong with us?’”

Dale, who helped plant a church in Virginia, said churches must consider the needs of post-modern people if they hope to reach them.

“The question is, do you have those things in your church and can you reach out to people who are searching for those types of things?” Dale said. “That may take a real honest evaluation of your ministry to answer that question.”

As churches seek to answer that question, Dale wants to help give them a clearer picture of how the future might look.

One way he will do that is through regional projects involving local Baptist leaders. The first such project in north central North Carolina is already underway.

"I hope to build networks in the state by region around particular issues," he said. The projects are called "Our Common Future."

"They recognize that churches, associations and the state convention all have a common future oriented around ushering in the kingdom," he said.

Baptists can use the possible scenarios developed by the projects to determine ministry opportunities.

"There's nothing worse than a church that answers questions that people aren't asking," Dale said. "Unfortunately, we do that far too much."

The scenarios will be based on international, national, local and neighborhood trends. One such trend is the increasing diversity in the state.

"The issue of reaching out to African Americans and Hispanics is just the tip of the iceberg," he said. "To expect things to remain the same is a dangerous assumption.

"A surprise only becomes a problem if you haven't prepared for it, and if we increase at least our mental and spiritual preparedness, then surprises become ministry opportunities rather than anxieties."

Dale said futurists try to look at trends that run deep through society rather than fads.

"Beanie Baby ministry is not the way to build a ministry to the future," he said.

Deep trends allow futurists to give a general forecast but not a prediction of the future.

"No one knows what's going to happen in the future, but we can see the rain clouds on the horizon and the seeds in the soil and we can do some worthwhile speculation on the plants that might grow," he said.

-30-

Louisiana considering
religious-liberty measure

By Lacy Thompson

BATON ROUGE, La. (ABP) -- A move to establish a higher wall of protection for religious freedom is underway in Louisiana.

Supporters of such a move recently presented concerns to a joint legislative committee, insisting that action is needed to ensure the state's citizens their full measure of religious liberty.

"There should be the highest of protections for religious freedom," said Brent Walker, general counsel and associate executive director for the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, a religious-liberty organization based in Washington. "Government should be put on a short leash whenever it tries to fiddle with the rights of conscience."

At one time, that was the case, said Walker, who provided lead testimony for state representatives and senators attending the recent study-committee hearing.

Walker cited the First Amendment, which reads: "Congress shall make no law respecting

an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

Those 16 words are critical, he explained: "The wise architects of our republic fashioned these twin pillars -- No Establishment and Free Exercise -- and placed them first in the Bill of Rights to protect what many of them believed to be a God-given right -- religious freedom."

The establishment clause prevents government from promoting, endorsing or helping religion, Walker noted. The free-exercise clause is designed to prevent government from discouraging, burdening or hurting religion in any way.

"The religion clauses require government to accommodate religion without advancing it, protect religion without promoting it, lift burdens on the exercise of religion without extending religion an impermissible benefit," Walker said. "These twin pillars buttress the wall of separation that is so critical to ensuring our precious liberty."

The current push relates to the free-exercise clause, Walker noted. For years, the nation's courts said that before government could restrict a person's religious freedom, it had to show it had a compelling interest for doing so and had tried all other means of accommodation.

Then came 1990, which brought "a constitutional bombshell that all but gutted the First Amendment," he said. That year, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that government no longer had to meet the two-part test in order to restrict religious freedom. Indeed, all government had to do was show it had a reasonable interest and was not singling religion out for restriction but was enforcing a generally applicable law.

The high court said it was up to the legislative branch of government -- not the judicial -- to extend protection of that sort to religious freedom, Walker noted.

In 1993, Congress did exactly that by passing the Religious Freedom Restoration Act. The measure re-established the two-part test on government. It was passed with the support of a broad coalition of religious and civil-liberties groups and hailed as the "most important piece of legislation protecting religious freedom since the First Amendment itself was ratified," Walker said.

"Only a handful of people thought (the Religious Freedom Restoration Act) was poor policy or believed it was unconstitutional," he added. "That is the good news. The bad news is that six of them sit on the United States Supreme Court."

Indeed, in 1997, the nation's highest court ruled that Congress had overstepped its bounds in passing the act. Essentially, the court left the act in force at the federal level but said Congress could not apply it to state and local governments.

That decision has hurt religious freedom in the nation, Walker said. He cited instances in which Jews were subjected to autopsies against their religious beliefs, attorneys attempted to force clergy to divulge facts about their members' confessions and zoning policies were used to exclude minority religions from a particular area.

Religious-liberty supporters have responded on two fronts -- trying to pass both another federal law they hope will stand constitutional muster and similar bills in individual states, Walker explained.

Seven states already have religious-liberty protection written into their constitutions. Five others have recently passed legislation adding such protection. This year, measures are pending in 14 others.

Louisiana is one such state. Rep. Jimmy Long, D-Natchitoches, introduced a measure in last year's special session of the Louisiana Legislature. When it was amended in committee to

exempt prisoners from the religious freedom protection, however, supporters withdrew the measure and referred it to a study committee.

In appearing before that committee recently, Walker urged passage of a religious-freedom bill that exempts no group. "If anyone's religious freedom is denied, everyone's religious freedom is threatened," he said. "In other words, there should be no exemptions that would prevent, for example, prisoners from claiming the protection of the law."

Louisiana prison officials last year urged that prisoners be exempted from the religious-freedom law, arguing that it would lead to frivolous lawsuits and weaken safety and order in prisons.

However, Walker pointed out that courts can dismiss frivolous lawsuits out-of-hand and that safety and order in prisons is recognized as a compelling interest in denying religious-liberty claims.

"Finally, when one starts making exemptions, where does one draw the line?" Walker asked. "It will be difficult to fend off other requests for exemptions once you start down that road. Pretty soon, protection for religious freedom will resemble Swiss cheese."

During questioning, Walker emphasized that the intent of the legislation is not to grant carte blanche to religious-liberty claims. "This does not give anybody a free ticket on religion," he said, adding it is merely an effort to level the playing field for religion.

Others also spoke in support of such a move. Representatives of the Anti-Defamation League, Roman Catholics, Prison Fellowship ministries and American Civil Liberties Union all cited the need for a properly-worded religious freedom bill.

The next step in the process is for the study committee to prepare a report to be presented to the entire Legislature, said Ken Ward, executive director of the Louisiana Moral and Civic Foundation.

Legislation then will be drafted and submitted for consideration.

-30-

Baptists in greater Washington
realizing dream of seminary

By Pam Parry

FALLS CHURCH, Va. (ABP) -- Church leaders in Northern Virginia believe they are now living a dream that has gone unfulfilled since the 1820s -- the establishment of a Baptist theological seminary in the nation's capital.

The John Leland Center for Theological Studies opened its doors on a shoestring budget and without denominational backing last fall. Now the seminary, based in a building owned by Columbia Baptist Church in Falls Church, Va., has 54 students taking courses toward one of three academic degrees.

Randel Everett, senior pastor of Columbia Baptist Church, said the Leland Center is a reincarnation of a dream that harks back to Luther Rice, a Baptist denominational leader and promoter of missions in the early 1800s.

Rice's missionary vision led him to advocate the starting of Baptist colleges in the United

States, beginning with Columbian College in Washington in 1821. The school, intended as a national entity that would serve to unite a widely spread Baptist denomination, quickly ran into financial problems. Eventually it severed all ties with Baptists and became known as George Washington University in 1903.

While Rice's vision for a theological school may have never died among Baptists in Washington, it has undergone changes. Rather than emphasizing its denomination, the Leland Center is geared toward connecting theological education to the local church and meeting the changing needs of ministers.

Baptists in Northern Virginia have yearned for a theological center near the nation's capital for years, Everett said, because they believed the Washington area provides a unique educational laboratory. For example, the seminary is tapping into the resources of nearby ministry groups including the Baptist Joint Committee, the Baptist World Alliance, Prison Fellowship, the District of Columbia Baptist Convention, the Mount Vernon Baptist Association and many local churches. These groups provide not only natural partnerships for student internships but also some of the best faculty available in the nation, Everett said.

"We really wanted this to be a church-based seminary, because it is so easy to have a disconnect between the seminary and the local churches," Everett said. "One of the ways we felt that we could accomplish this is to use faculty who are practitioners. They have the academic credentials, but they are also practitioners and are ministers themselves."

Jeffrey Willetts, the academic director for the Leland Center, said being a church-based seminary was an important distinctive for the school.

"So many institutions of higher learning have become disconnected with their natural constituents, and for the seminary, that would be the church," he said. "Using pastor teachers as well as drawing from the churches in the community and their resources" provides a rare learning experience, he added.

The seminary's suburban Washington locale also adds an international flavor. Students hail from Vietnam, Latin America, Ghana, Ethiopia and Central America.

One student, Ruth Reynolds, said the school embraces diversity and the gifts of all people. In addition to its openness, she said the seminary is sensitive to its Baptist heritage, which she said is reflected in its name. Leland was a Virginia Baptist pastor who in the 18th century worked behind the scenes to influence the framers of the U.S. Constitution to include the Bill of Rights, thereby securing religious freedom and the separation of church and state.

"I see him as a kingdom builder, and that is what the school is encouraging us to be," Reynolds said.

Another student, John Fernandez, said the center has been for him an answer to prayer. At age 40 the government attorney has been called into ministry. He asked God to provide a way for him to get the necessary training while causing the least amount of disruption for his family. For now, Fernandez is keeping his job and attending seminary part time. While he eventually plans to become a full-time student, Fernandez said the Leland Center has provided him with a smooth transition between careers.

Bill Ellis, pastor of a small congregation outside Manassas, Va., said he's taking only a few courses. He already has two seminary degrees, but it's been some time since he graduated. So, Ellis has enrolled both for a refresher and to learn some new things.

Layman Dan Turner simply wants to be a better Christian. Turner said he doesn't feel

called to vocational ministry, but he is involved in a couple of volunteer ministries at Dunn Loring Community Church of God near Falls Church, Va., and he wants to be better equipped to perform those duties.

"I am pursuing the master of theological studies right now," Turner said, adding he doesn't see giving up his job as a highway research engineer with the Federal Highway Administration.

Turner found the seminary in the phone book, and he said the learning experience to date has been sensational.

"Since it was a new seminary, I guess my expectations weren't quite as high. But the quality of the professors and the learning that we have had has just been tremendous. It has really exceeded my expectations," he said. "It's been a real life-changing experience, more so than I thought it would be. My perspective has completely changed."

Turner is in Professor Michael Catlett's Old Testament class this term. Catlett, pastor of McLean Baptist Church, is among the 50 people whose vision spawned the seminary.

"In my own seminary training, I did not receive, in my estimation, enough instruction or assistance for the fulfilling of the vocation of church," Catlett said. "We realize that this is not a single track. People are not just looking to be pastors here or to fulfill any particular single role. But if we could continue to keep one foot in the sphere of the church and one foot in the sphere of academia, people could realize that they really are not two distinct spheres. We need to unite them in a creative way."

The Leland Center is one of a number of new Baptist schools to crop up in the past several years, including another seminary in Virginia, Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond. Most were launched in response to conservative leadership in the Southern Baptist Convention, but the Leland Center is apolitical, emphasized Sheila King Everett, the seminary's administrative director.

Her husband, Randel Everett, said the seminary has not sought financial support from either the SBC or the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, a moderate organization founded during the nearly 20-year battle for control of the nation's largest Protestant denomination.

"I think there would have been a need for the Leland Center if there had never even been a convention controversy, because we could not find any school that was addressing the kind of unique needs that we find here in the greater D.C. area," he said.

The seminary receives funds from the Mount Vernon Baptist Association, the District of Columbia Baptist Convention, local churches, private contributors and tuition.

-30-

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

Texas upbringing translates
into 44-year missions career

By Robert O'Brien

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Keith Parks learned how to ride and to "shoot straight" with people

while growing up on a ranch in Texas.

Now the cowhand turned world-renowned missions strategist is riding off into the sunset after a 45-year journey over an exciting and sometimes rough-and-tumble Baptist missions trail.

Thirty-eight years at the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board ended amid controversy in 1992, when he retired early after 12 years as president and joined the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship as its first global-missions coordinator.

Parks' ministry will take another turn in June, when he ends his second career and moves back to his native Texas to live in the Dallas-Fort Worth area and devote time to writing.

Perhaps Parks' greatest legacy in Baptist missions has been his adamant conviction that more resources should be directed to "World A" -- the one-fourth of the world's population with little or no access to the gospel.

"Keith championed deployment of specially trained missionaries to reach closed or restricted access countries when others opposed it," said Gary Baldrige, CBF's associate missions coordinator who also worked with Parks at the Foreign Mission Board, which has since been renamed the International Mission Board.

"By the time he left the FMB, at least 100 unreached people groups, with more than one million members each, had multiple advocates to share the gospel after years of neglect," Baldrige said.

Parks' CBF tenure has also featured his determination to reach "the least of the least, the disenfranchised, the poor, the neglected, those who cannot be advocates for themselves."

CBF colleagues say Parks has more energy -- even at 71 -- than most people half his age. He can work long hours and spend long days on the road while maintaining a sense of humor, an open mind, a deep sense of integrity, and innovative ideas that he encourages in others.

"Though many missionaries are new to cross-cultural ministry, they've come with old ideas about missions," said missionary "T" Thomas. "Keith has been the young one in his thinking and has led veteran and 'debutante' missionaries in innovative ways of thinking and ministering."

Thomas and his wife, Kathie, recalled the days after they had resigned as Foreign Mission Board missionaries and, with a handful of others, were struggling to envision a CBF strategy for global missions.

"CBF brought Keith on board, and within six years we had a respected global missions organization," Thomas said, noting that Parks' presence gave the organization prestige and influence far beyond its age and size.

Parks' leadership and biblical preaching have led many people to accept Christ, surrender to missions and share his vision. He issues the same challenges at home and overseas, expecting nationals to look beyond local needs and be part of reaching a lost world.

"If Dr. Parks said there was a bus outside headed to Mongolia, I'd get on it," said a Brazilian pastor after hearing Parks preach about the needs among unreached people groups.

CBF Coordinator Daniel Vestal said the first time he heard Parks preach was a turning point in his life. "It awakened in me a missions consciousness that has been a central part of my ministry."

Even an opponent in the Baptist controversy that led Parks to quit as FMB president, after hearing him preach powerfully and movingly at a missionary appointment service, was overheard to exclaim: "I don't understand how a man can preach like that and not agree with us!"

Parks has hobnobbed with world leaders, both religious and secular, but that doesn't turn

his head. Ask the janitor who gazes in pleased amazement as Parks introduces himself and asks about his family. Ask foreign nationals whose shoulders straighten and eyes glow as an encounter with Parks makes them feel like equals with something to offer.

“With him there are no ‘little people,’ as the Indonesians call menial workers and persons of lower economic means, and there are no jobs too menial for him,” said his wife, Helen Jean.

“Keith will admit when he’s wrong, a rare commodity these days, and he’s one of the best thinkers and missiologists I ever worked with,” added Sam Pittman, retired FMB executive director of public affairs.

Parks laughs about being bald. “The heads God was ashamed of, he covered up,” Parks explained with a characteristic chuckle and grin.

Cover-up just isn't his style, on his head or when it comes to disseminating information, even when less candor would make things easier on him. Openness won him both praise and criticism as differences with his board of trustees gradually forced him out of his role as FMB president.

In 1992, journalists in the Baptist Press bureau system honored Parks for distinguished service. His “statesmanship, worldview, spiritual depth, integrity and commitment to honest, open reporting inspired us in our effort to ‘trust the Lord and tell the people,’” the journalists said.

Parks’ reputation for honesty and spiritual leadership began at home. Daughter Eloise Parks, a chaplain at Parklands Hospital in Dallas, said: “If Dad said the sky is purple, I wouldn’t walk to the window to see. That’s how honest he’s always been with us.”

“God led us into ministry,” added Stan, another of his four children. “But it didn’t hurt that Dad was such an excellent role model, selling missions at home as well as in public.” Stan and his brother, Kent, are CBF international coordinators in Asia. The Parks’ oldest son, Randall, was a missionary to Egypt and now works as international development and management consultant there.

“Neither I nor the children ever remember Keith not having his devotional time early in the morning,” said his wife. “When our sons would come in from delivering morning paper routes, there was their dad, reading his Bible and shaving with an electric razor.”

God’s call has always come first in Parks’ life.

When Parks was 6, doctors in Memphis, Texas, told his parents that their son, stricken with rheumatic fever, wouldn't live beyond age 13. Bob and Allie Parks didn't burden their son with that information but knelt by his bed and prayed, “Lord, if you will spare him, we’ll do all we can to prepare him to serve you.”

Keith responded to God’s call to ministry as a high school senior and was overwhelmed when his sister told him of his parents’ prayer.

Bob Parks, who raised and traded cattle in Texas and Arkansas, bears the responsibility for his son’s rock-like commitment to “shoot straight” with truth and integrity.

“Daddy wanted to show people that an honest man could out-trade shysters in the business,” said Parks, who could ride a horse before he could walk. “Daddy was known for his integrity. If a man died and left a widow with cattle, she would call Bob Parks and say, ‘I know I can trust you to sell these for me.’”

A self-described “missions illiterate” in his younger years, Parks didn't consider missions until he was a summer missionary to the island of San Andreas and saw many people respond to Jesus Christ.

"I came back wanting to be a missionary but feeling that I could never qualify to join that 'holy band,'" he said.

But the missions call came anyway -- at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, where he met his wife, Texan Helen Jean Bond, and earned a doctorate in theology.

"Most classes had a missions tone and missions seemed to permeate the entire school," said Parks.

"I came to realize that it was grace that had saved me -- and it was grace that would qualify me for missions."

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