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Baptist ethicists differ on NATO air strikes

By Bob Allen

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- Two Baptist ethicists differed in early reactions to United States involvement in NATO military strikes against Serbian targets in Yugoslavia.

The March 24 air attacks came after Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic repeatedly defied demands to end an offensive directed against ethnic Albanians in Kosovo, a province of Serbia.

In a televised address to the nation, President Clinton said the NATO strikes were aimed at protecting thousands of people in Kosovo from a mounting military offensive and preventing the conflict from spreading.

Clinton said the United States had done everything possible to solve the problem peacefully. "If President Milosevic will not make peace, we will limit his ability to make war," Clinton said.

Two Baptist ethicists, both based in Nashville, Tenn., disagreed on whether the strikes were warranted.

Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, said the strikes came "too late" for him, adding he has been calling for military action against Milosevic "for several years."

"Several thousand people would have been saved," if action had been taken earlier, Land said March 25 on the ERLC radio program "For Faith and Family."

"This is a war-criminal regime," Land said.

"I just hope we have the spine and the nerve to act decisively," Land said. "The worst thing that could happen would be to apply American power indecisively. That is what we did in Southeast Asia and Vietnam."

Land said the strikes meet the eight criteria for "just war" that have been used by Christians for centuries to decide whether a military action is moral.

Using the same criteria, however, another Baptist ethicist raised questions about the attacks. "The barbarous actions of Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic do not morally justify U.S. air strikes against Yugoslavia," said Robert Parham, executive director of the Baptist Center for Ethics.

Parham said the U.S. action "may be more about military machismo than making peace." The action's success "appears unlikely," he said, given NATO's reluctance to commit ground forces. Finally, he said, it is unclear that benefits gained by the strikes will outweigh future harm.

"Once again, the Clinton administration's foreign policy looks like, 'Here a bomb, there a bomb, everywhere a bomb,'" Parham said. "High-tech bombing without political resolution that leads to peace and security for all only deepens animosities and promises more conflict."

Southern Baptist missionaries in Belgrade evacuated Yugoslavia hours before the attacks, according to officials at the Southern Baptist International Mission Board in Richmond, Va.

Two couples -- Randy and Joan Bell, originally from Oklahoma and New Mexico, and Ben and Meredith Hanna, from Texas and California -- left with their families early Wednesday morning and drove to Sarajevo in Bosnia-Herzegovina, where they rested before continuing to Zagreb, Croatia, according to a news release.

Nine other IMB missionaries were also headed to Sarajevo from an area in Bosnia where sympathies for Yugoslavian Serbs run high.

The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship has no personnel living in Yugoslavia, according to a spokesperson, but they do have missionaries who work with ethnic Albanians. All CBF personnel were reported safe and expected to be busy in coming days ministering to refugees, the spokesperson for the Atlanta-based Fellowship said.

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Non-Christians, Christians disagree about Jesus' resurrection, survey says

NEW YORK (ABP) -- Almost a third of non-Christians and nine in 10 Christians believe Jesus Christ rose from the dead after dying on the cross, according to a Newsweek magazine poll.

According to the survey, published in the magazine's March 29 issue, 88 percent of Christians and 32 percent of non-Christians said they believe in Christ's resurrection.

Sixty-two percent of people responding to the survey described their religious preference as Protestant, 20 percent as Roman Catholic, 7 percent as no religion, 4 percent as non-Christian and 3 percent as Jewish.

Asked, "Do you think Jesus Christ ever actually lived?" 93 percent of Christians and 68 percent of non-Christians responded, "Yes."

Seventy-two percent of evangelical Protestants said it is "very important" that non-Christians convert to Christianity, as did 25 percent of other Protestants and 17 percent of Catholics.

Asked about what should be organized Christianity's top priority in the next millennium, 38 percent of Christians said returning to traditional moral values, 32 percent said spreading the faith, 13 percent said increasing tolerance and 7 percent said righting social ills.

The survey ran with an article entitled "2,000 years of Jesus" on how the spread of Christianity shaped the modern world. The issue also includes an article written by evangelist Billy Graham describing the importance of his commitment to Christ.

Most people in the survey agreed the world is a better place because of Jesus. Nearly half (48 percent) said they think there would be more war, 64 percent said there would be less charity and 57 percent said there would be less happiness if there had never been a Jesus.

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-- By ABP staff

Study, discipleship groups on rise

By Ken Walker

LEXINGTON, Ky. (ABP) -- If you want to grow stronger in the Christian faith, join the club.

More accurately, you might join the thousands of Christians who attend Bible study and discipleship groups.

Whether meeting during the evening, morning or lunch hour, these courses are on the rise, said Jim Clontz.

The associate director of discipleship and stewardship for the Kentucky Baptist Convention estimates 800 Baptist groups have completed such studies in his state alone.

"They're primarily lay-driven," said Clontz. "They're taught by laypersons and the people in the groups are laypersons. They help by giving church members a greatly-increased vision."

Kentucky mirrors a nationwide trend, said Henry Blackaby, co-author of "Experiencing God," a 12-week study course that has sold more than 2 million copies.

"There's a huge hunger," said Blackaby, who also serves as assistant to the presidents of three Southern Baptist Convention agencies. "There was a spiritual vacuum. People were saying, 'there must be more to the Christian life than just activity.'"

That desire can be seen in tangible ways. Kay Arthur's Precepts' Ministries sells 200,000 copies of her Bible studies a year, four times the average of her book sales in 1970.

LifeWay Christian Resources of Nashville, Tenn., reports sales of nearly 12 million books on discipleship and family studies since 1991. The figures rose from 1.2 million in 1991-92 to 2.2 million by 1996-97.

Courses such as "Experiencing God" and studies produced by Bible Study Fellowship and Southern Baptist women Kay Arthur and Beth Moore enroll millions worldwide. Spokespeople for each of these movements said participation is growing.

Organizers claim this phenomenon shows the desire of many Christians to make faith a daily reality -- not just something they dust off before Sunday worship services.

Course leaders agree. They cite such benefits as feeling closer to God, wanting to help others mature spiritually and a new desire for increased missions activity.

Sam Strader began leading a Lexington men's class of Bible Study Fellowship after seeing the dramatic impact the program had on his wife.

"At the time I felt like I was doing a lot of busy stuff," said Strader, then a partner in a major accounting firm.

"I was on three or four boards of organizations," said the retired businessman. "But what I sensed in my heart was I wasn't making a difference in the lives of other people. I wasn't discipling anybody."

Since 1991, the interdenominational class has grown from 150 to 225 participants and added a companion children's class. Strader said many fathers told him they are delighted to be helping their kids learn the Bible.

Strader said he feels called to his volunteer leadership role in the same way God calls a pastor to the pulpit.

"I feel closer to my Lord because I study his word daily and try to apply it," he said. "I tell people if they come to this class regularly and do the work on a daily basis, it will make a difference in their lives."

Similar passions inspire others. Laura Bevel leads classes at her church in Bowling Green, Ky., using Bible studies written by Beth Moore. But Bevel also makes a weekly, two-hour trip to Nashville to attend Bible Study Fellowship.

At Porter Memorial Baptist Church in Lexington, Ky., Sue McGee said her Wednesday morning study has led to major changes in women's lives.

She pointed to class-sponsored events that have led nearly a dozen women to accept Christ. One participant who had been living with a man broke off the relationship, reconciled with her ex-husband and now brings non-Christian friends to church.

"People are hungering to know God in a deeper way," said McGee, who uses material from several authors. "They're finding they need to get into his word for him to speak to them."

Baby boomers and "busters" represent the majority in these small-group studies, Clontz said.

Their thirst for in-depth knowledge contrasts with older Christians, who are more satisfied with general information, he said.

"They want much more specifics than the 'builders,'" Clontz said, referring to those 55 and older. "Younger people seem to want more detail. If they're going to church for an hour, they want a list of things they can do or they want to grow spiritually."

Sam House, projects specialist for LifeWay Christian Resources, which publishes "Experiencing God" and more than 200 other discipleship studies, said small-group formats foster closer personal relationships.

"This restores a function we have lost in the church," he said. "The focus has been on gathering and activity instead of God's presence and the unity that exists in that. Too often, modern Christians think of church as gathering rather than community."

House said America's changing dynamics also might play a role in the spread of Bible studies.

Americans now live in such a diverse culture that a shared ethic and morality has faded, House said. Because people can't depend on culture to provide a sense of right and wrong, he said, they are searching for it in the Bible.

"This has fueled a hunger to go back to what God's word says," he said. "It could very well be God's timing, too; part of his design to bring revival."

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Impact of 'Experiencing God' crosses denominational lines

By Ken Walker

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Now an adviser to three Southern Baptist agency presidents, Henry Blackaby said he hesitated when asked to put his teachings on knowing the will of God into a book. He had never written one before.

Editor Claude King helped design the interactive format that has become a model for Bible studies such as MasterLife and others.

In the resulting 220-page “Experiencing God” workbook, Blackaby tells students that God is at work all around the world and wants Christians to join in. Blackaby combines illustrations from the Bible with anecdotes from his own experience.

“When Jesus said to make disciples he meant to bring them into a relationship with him,” Blackaby said. “From that point on, he can function as Lord over their life. But people didn’t know how to do it. That’s what ‘Experiencing God’ is all about.”

Blackaby said he also hopes people will come face to face with the Bible’s “Almighty Author” every time they open the workbook “and understand the purpose of Scripture is to reveal God, his ways and his purposes.”

Used by nearly 20 denominations, the study has created more than 30 spin-off products with sales of more than four million units. It has been translated into more than 30 languages.

Wayne Newby, director of missions for the West Union Baptist Association in Paducah, Ky., said it would be hard to overestimate the impact this teaching has had on deepening the faith of Christians who use it.

Newby, who organized an October conference featuring Blackaby, said “Experiencing God” goes far beyond the Baptist denomination. “This is one of the most popular and lasting programs” anywhere, he said.

Jim Clontz, associate director of the Kentucky Baptist Convention discipleship and stewardship department, said he believes “Experiencing God” has helped pastors and lay people to look at God in a different light.

“Instead of trying to do something and ask God to bless it, they’re looking for what God is doing and joining him,” he said.

This has raised both individual and corporate self-esteem, Clontz added. Even small congregations believe they can accomplish great things when God leads them, he said.

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Bible Study Fellowship requires students’ commitment

By Ken Walker

SAN ANTONIO, Texas (ABP) -- Bible Study Fellowship goes against the grain of a fast-paced world fond of short-term commitments and bite-sized devotions.

While some discipleship courses take as few as four weeks, BSF follows a 32-week schedule that parallels the school year. Completing a full rotation of studies requires seven years.

Nor is homework to be taken lightly. Fail to prepare your lesson and you can’t join in the weekly small group discussion that accompanies the class lecture.

Miss three meetings and you’re declared inactive, meaning you risk being replaced by someone on a waiting list to join the group.

“We can do things in Bible Study Fellowship you can’t do in the church,” said Jane Roach, director of BSF’s training division. “It’s hard to say [to a church member] ‘You can’t come this week unless you’ve read the sermon notes ahead of time,’ but we can.”

The group was founded by Audrey Wetherell Johnson, at one time a missionary to China. After spending 30 months in concentration camps during World War II, she came to the United States for temporary rest.

That visit stretched into several years. In 1952, five women in her California church asked the former seminary instructor to teach them the Bible.

Johnson agreed reluctantly, but only if her students would diligently answer written questions about the Scriptures.

The study quickly grew, eventually moving into a church. As more participants enrolled, the organization incorporated in 1959.

“Her goal was always that people would study the Bible for themselves,” Roach said. “She wanted them to teach others and strengthen Sunday school and other parts of the church.”

Reflecting her missionary bent, the founder also wanted students to develop the kind of relationship with God that would inspire them to lead other people to become Christians.

The group’s focus is on urban areas. The organization feels God called it to reach society’s leaders, Roach said, so they concentrate on cities.

Though not available everywhere, the fellowship maintains enthusiastic adherents.

“They are learning what the Bible has to say and what it says to them,” Roach said. “It changes their life. They get to know God and have a personal relationship with him, and they like it.”

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Precept Ministries focuses on Bible, not commentaries

By Ken Walker

CHATTANOOGA, Tenn. (ABP) -- Bible study should be just that, according to Kay Arthur’s Precept Ministries.

Instead of turning to commentaries or study helps, students use cross-references, word studies and Greek dictionaries to help them uncover the deeper meaning of Bible passages.

Arthur, a Southern Baptist, founded Precept Ministries with her husband, Jack. They were missionaries in Mexico, until a series of medical problems forced them to return home to Chattanooga, Tenn.

While her husband went to work as the manager of a Christian radio station, Kay Arthur -- a registered nurse -- developed the teaching skills she first used on the mission field.

After she started a home-based study in Chattanooga, the church they were attending asked her to teach teenagers.

Enthusiasm over those classes caused the Bible study to soon outgrow their home. To accommodate the crowds, they purchased land with two old barns, naming their property “Reach Out Ranch.”

From those beginnings emerged today’s nine-building campus near the Chattanooga airport. It has TV, radio and video production facilities, classrooms for 350 students and a 500-seat auditorium.

“Kay’s core principle was her inductive approach to study -- letting the Bible speak for itself,” her husband said. “She wanted to introduce them to the Bible and establish God’s people in his word, in a way that produces reverence for him.”

During the past 28 years, Kay Arthur has written more than 30 commercially published books and about 50 self-published volumes, including Bible-study workbooks.

Jack Arthur did the preaching for the family nearly 15 years on the mission field. But he admits he doesn’t have his wife’s ability to teach the Bible verse by verse. His role in the ministry is behind the scenes, as ministry president, overseeing administrative details.

Still, the arrangement upset some traditionalists. A friend once lectured him that he ought to get his wife off the platform and take over the teaching, but today he seldom hears such comments.

Besides, he said, "I didn't take a back seat, I took a different seat."

The ministry has a presence in more than 100 countries, with materials in more than 20 languages. Kay Arthur's TV show is syndicated nationally, while her radio programs reach around the world.

An estimated 100,000 people study Precept materials in North America. The numbers are believed to be higher overseas, but the ministry doesn't maintain a count.

"Our thing is training," Jack Arthur said. "The best thing we can do is write Bible studies and then train leaders to go around the country."

"I hope they go back into the body of Christ, in the local church, and take leadership roles," he said. "Our goal has never changed. It's to establish God's people in his word."

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Women's Bible-study leader drawing sell-out crowds

By Ken Walker

BOWLING GREEN, Ky. (ABP) -- Two years ago Laura Bevel had never heard of Beth Moore, founder of Living Proof Ministries.

But as a spiritual-growth leader at Living Hope Baptist Church in Bowling Green, Ky., Bevel was approached regularly by people wanting to use Moore's Bible studies.

"I had women saying, 'My sister in Kansas City has taken this study' or 'My mother in Atlanta did this, can you get it?'" Bevel said.

The requests prompted her to order "A Woman's Heart: God's Dwelling Place," a study relating the Old Testament tabernacle to modern life in Christ.

Since then, several hundred people in the Kentucky congregation have studied materials developed by Moore. Her studies also have since been used in several small-group couples' meetings and two coed Sunday school classes.

Bevel predicted church members will also snap up Moore's newest workbook, "Living Beyond Yourself," a study on the fruits of the Holy Spirit. It will be followed in June by "Breaking Free: Making Liberty in Christ a Reality in Life."

"Beth is just an engaging personality," Bevel said. "Her studies have brought a hunger for God's word. For a lot of women in the first course, it was the first time they had ever taken a Bible study of any kind."

Moore is booked for a seminar at Living Hope in October. But don't bother calling for tickets. They sold out six months ago.

Four of her books rank among the top 10 best-selling, non-dated Bible studies published by LifeWay Christian Resources. Sales of her materials skyrocketed from 32,000 in 1996 to 263,000 in 1998.

A graduate of Southwest Texas State University, Moore has been teaching for 20 years, primarily around Texas. Her longtime friend and administrative assistant, Kim Bankard, said Moore first taught in a Sunday school class for women.

Word-of-mouth referrals led to invitations to teach at seminars and women's retreats. A mentor told Moore she had a gift, Bankard said, and Moore began accepting more speaking invitations.

"Her ultimate goal has always been to see women, and men, grow in God's word," her assistant said. "She wants them to see how important it is to be in the Word daily."

Moore tailors lessons for females, but so many men kept sneaking into her newest Sunday school class at First Baptist Church of Houston that officials agreed to make it coed.

Bankard said Moore's transparency and warm personality are primary reasons for her popularity. Moore shares her heart and experiences in a way people find "contagious," said Bankard.

But Moore remains humble despite her growing popularity, Bankard said.

"I'll get on the plane after a conference and Beth cries the whole way home," she said. "She can't believe God has called her to do that."

"She challenges women to daily Bible study," added Faith Whatley, a women's-event specialist at LifeWay. "Beth has a unique way of explaining Scripture. She relates things as a woman and mother that I've never heard before."

At 41, with one daughter in college and another in high school, Moore relates easily to people in their 30s and 40s, who represent the majority of her audiences.

Since her studies are packaged for and aimed at women, men generally don't like to admit they find her studies appealing, Whatley said.

But LifeWay's Chris Adams said the biblical basis of Moore's teaching transcends gender.

"People learn not only what the word says but how to apply it," said Adams, a women's-enrichment ministry specialist. "Men and women are hungry for meat."

Take Moore's study on the Old Testament tabernacle, which explores the building of the temple and its intricate design, showing its pivotal role in God's eternal plan. "It's one of the most incredible Bible studies I've ever done," Adams said.

Moore's work also answered a call from Baptist churches that were forming women's ministries, she said. These new groups were searching for material and wanted LifeWay to produce it.

And Living Proof resources also have been a catalyst for the formation of new women's ministries, she said.

"I think church staffs are beginning to see what a need this is," Adams said. "I'm seeing more women hired for women's ministries or as ministers to women."

Moore's program is intensive, Bevel said, with homework lessons taking 30 to 45 minutes a day to complete.

But what really drive Moore's popularity are her thorough knowledge of the Bible and a way of presenting it that grabs people's attention, she said. "People are hungry for God's Word. They want to know it for themselves."

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