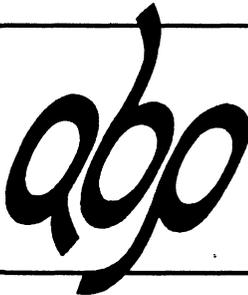


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WRAPUP:

**Southern Baptists OK study
to review doctrinal statement**

By Bob Allen

ATLANTA (ABP) -- A year after amending the "Baptist Faith and Message" for the first time in 35 years, the 1999 Southern Baptist Convention authorized a committee to review, and potentially revise further, the denomination's official statement of faith.

Meeting June 15-16 in Atlanta, messengers approved a motion by Virginia layman T.C. Pinckney instructing the convention president to name a "blue ribbon" committee to study the confessional statement and report any recommendations next year. Pinckney, a leader in the SBC's ruling conservative faction, said it is time to reconsider the statement in light of leadership changes during the last 20 years, dubbed by victors the "conservative resurgence."

"I believe it is appropriate at this time that the 'Baptist Faith and Message' be reviewed and that it be made consistent with the current stand of the Southern Baptist Convention," said Pinckney. A retired Air Force general from Alexandria, Va., Pinckney is a former member of the SBC Executive Committee and a leader in Southern Baptist Conservatives of Virginia, a breakaway group from the more-moderate Baptist General Association of Virginia.

The "Baptist Faith and Message," first adopted by the convention in 1925 and revised in 1963, is not binding on churches but is used as a guide for teaching what Baptists generally believe. It is also used in hiring seminary professors and other denominational employees.

Last year, the SBC added a controversial statement on the family, which said in part that wives should submit to their husbands. The amendment drew wide attention in the media and prompted at least two seminary professors to step down rather than endorse the change.

This year's meeting lacked a blockbuster for gaining media attention compared to recent conventions, which have also featured resolutions calling for a Disney boycott in 1997 and the evangelization of Jews in 1996. It substituted quantity. Despite a shortened, two-day, schedule, messengers considered an unusually

high volume of motions and 14 resolutions. One journalist cleverly summed up the convention, "Praise the Lord and pass the admonitions."

Actions targeted themes that have grown familiar in recent years: homosexuality, abortion, school prayer -- and Bill Clinton, who belongs to a Southern Baptist church but is a frequent foil of the convention's conservative leaders.

A resolution at this year's convention blasted a recent proclamation by Clinton declaring Gay and Lesbian Pride Month in June and his appointment of an open homosexual as ambassador to Luxembourg. "Our love for our president compels us to rebuke him and publicly deplore his most public endorsement" of homosexuality, the resolution says.

For the second time in his presidency, criticism of Clinton spilled over to the Southern Baptist church where he is a member -- Immanuel Baptist Church in Little Rock, Ark. Two motions urging the church to exercise "discipline" against Clinton were ruled out of order, citing the convention's tradition of local-church autonomy in such matters. The church, which survived a challenge to the seating of its messengers in 1993, did not send messengers to this year's convention.

On the eve of this year's convention, however, SBC president Paige Patterson renewed an earlier call for the Arkansas church to chastise the president.

In a radio interview, Patterson termed Clinton's proclamation "entirely inconsistent with his confession as an evangelical Christian and certainly as a Southern Baptist." Because of Southern Baptists' structure, Patterson said there is nothing the convention can do about his membership in a particular congregation. "However, I would call once again on the church in which the president holds membership to take before them this proclamation he has made and make it the subject of church discipline," Patterson said.

Patterson, president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C., and a founder of the conservative resurgence, was elected unopposed to a traditional one-year term as convention president. Georgia pastor Frank Cox, also a conservative, was elected first vice president, also unopposed. Jerry Spencer, a conservative pastor from Alabama, won a contested race for second vice president.

In his president's address, Patterson called on Southern Baptists, having settled a long battle over biblical "inerrancy," to now acknowledge the "sufficiency" of Scripture. He said pastors should use "expository" preaching, sticking closely to interpretation and application of the Bible, while avoiding "12-minute sermonettes" that are geared to the tastes of listeners.

He also said Baptists should use the Bible for counseling, avoiding psychiatry, and to be wary of charismatic worship practices, which he termed a "minor emphasis" in Scripture. "My purpose is to remind Southern Baptists that our focus across the years has been the conversion of men and women to faith in Christ," he said.

Patterson said he is unconcerned about disputes over Calvinism among Southern Baptist conservatives, saying that seminary cafeterias were invented for such discussions. "If you have ever imbibed institutional cuisine," the long-time educator quipped, "you are aware there must be some other purpose for the existence of seminary food service than satisfying appetites."

In one of most emotional points of the convention, messengers applauded the parents of a Columbine High School victim who was killed after professing her faith, during a report of the North American Mission Board.

"We weren't perfect parents, and our children weren't perfect," said Brad Bernall, who along with his wife, Misty, received an extended standing ovation from messengers when introduced by NAMB President Bob Reccord.

The Bernalls' daughter, Cassie, has become well known for her courageous confession of faith in the Littleton, Colo., high school library before being gunned down by one of two fellow students who took the lives of 12 students and a teacher as well as their own April 20.

"Our kids ... have no right to privacy," said Brad Bernall, who suggested parents check the bedrooms of teenagers for "indicators" of serious problems. He said it was through difficult acts of parental "tough love" that their daughter embraced the Christian faith after toying with destructive behavior.

"An incredible outpouring of support" from within and outside the church has enabled the family to endure the loss of their 17-year-old daughter and to be able to encourage other parents of teens, said Misty Bernall.

In other business, the convention rejected a last-ditch effort to attempt to change the name of the 154-year-old convention, renaming it the "International Baptist Convention." Blaine Barber, a pastor from Michigan, said the regional designation hurts churches in the North. Despite rejection of the Executive Committee of two motions last year to consider a name change, Barber requested a straw poll among messengers this year to determine sentiment for renaming the SBC. His motion was overwhelmingly defeated.

Another convention resolution protested a published study on the psychological effects of so-called consensual sex between adults and children and opposed further such research.

Another called for an end to genocide and ethnic cleansing. It called on "the United States Congress, NATO, the United Nations and other multinational bodies to take immediate action to bring an end to those regimes which are guilty of crimes against humanity."

Another resolution opposed stem-cell research that involves destruction of human embryos.

Among motions referred to various convention entities were providing deaf interpreters at convention meetings and producing Sunday school material for children who are sight impaired.

More than 1,900 professions of faith were recorded during "Crossover" evangelistic events held prior to the convention. Tragedy marred the otherwise-festive weekend, when the son of an Atlanta pastor died while playing basketball at a block party sponsored by his church.

Kristen Jarrod Henderson, 13, collapsed about 2 p.m., June 12, while playing basketball. He was later pronounced dead at a hospital. Doctors said he suffered two heart attacks resulting from an undetectable pinched valve in his heart.

Henderson's father said the youth had accepted Christ in March, describing his son as a "happy, personable" boy who "would probably have become a preacher."

While a peaceful convention by recent standards, the Atlanta meeting also ranked as a small one. Registration by the middle of the final day was 11,352, compared to 8,582 at last year's convention in Salt Lake City, a pioneer area for Southern Baptists far from the Bible Belt. The last time the convention met in Atlanta, 1995, registration was 20,654.

The lower registration continues a trend of smaller conventions since cessation of the moderate-conservative conflict that inflated messenger totals in the 1980s. More than 40,000 messengers registered when the convention met in Atlanta in 1986, during the height of the controversy.

Recent convention crowds also run smaller, however, than those prior to the conservative-moderate controversy which began in 1979. A total of 22,872 messengers registered for the 1978 convention in Atlanta, nearly double this-year's number.

Land blasts religious 'suppression' by media, disputes ACLU's Lynn

By Lacy Thompson and Mark Wingfield

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Southern Baptists must not sit still for unfair media abuse and hostility, Richard Land insisted during his annual report to the Southern Baptist Convention as president of the denomination's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission.

"We live in a time of unprecedented moral and spiritual crisis in our nation," Land said. "And in the very time when our nation most needs to hear a sure and certain word from God through his people, those in the media and those in the press and those in society who oppose us are doing their very best to oppress us."

Indeed, the greatest threat of the day comes from those who would suppress Christians' right to express religious convictions in the public arena, Land said.

As an example, he spoke about a recent experience with CNN, whose headquarters building is located just across from the Georgia Dome, where he was speaking to messengers.

"CNN, if you're listening, I have a message for you, and I want you to hear it" Land said. "CNN is slanting the news. CNN is trying to beat up on Southern Baptists. And we're not going to stand for it silently anymore."

Land said CNN recently scheduled a program on Southern Baptists, featuring Americans United Executive Director Barry Lynn and California Baptist pastor and conservative activist Wiley Drake. Despite the suggestion that Land be invited in his capacity as spokesman for Southern Baptists on public policy issues, CNN called Land only to ask if he would be interested in being in the audience, he said.

This selection of guests that excludes people like him is typical of how CNN "slants the news," Land said. "Brother Wiley, I love you, but you're just too nice a guy to go up against Barry Lynn. You need somebody with a mean streak like me," Land said. "You've employed me to take on the Barry Lynns of this world, and I do it."

To make matters worse, Land said Lynn claimed during the program that Land once asserted the SBC ought to 'marry' the Republican Party.

"That's not what I said," Land told messengers. "Let me tell you and let me tell CNN what I really said. I said if the Republican Party wants the support of people who believe in God and who believe in the sanctity of all human life from conception onward and believe in the traditional family and believe that homosexuality is deviant and immoral behavior and shouldn't be approved and affirmed by the president of the United States, then they need to come and endorse our values and our beliefs and our understanding of the truth."

"And if they do, and they commit themselves to that, then we'll support them," Land said. "If a party wants our support, they have to get it the old-fashioned way. They have to earn it by supporting our basic beliefs."

If Southern Baptists are to support a candidate, they want a formal marriage ceremony, Land said, unlike Lynn, whom he said is "in bed with the liberal wing of the Democratic Party without benefit of matrimony."

In reply, Lynn said in a telephone interview that he stands by his assertion that Land sought to marry the SBC and the Republican Party. He quoted from a March 23, 1998, New York Times story about a meeting of conservative activists in Washington in which Land participated.

According to Lynn, the Times story quoted Land issuing this warning to Republican leaders: "The go-along, get-along strategy is dead. No more engagement. We want a wedding ring. We want a ceremony. We want a consummation of the marriage."

As for Land's comments that Lynn is "in bed" with Democrats without benefit of marriage, Lynn said: "I never attend any political function, no strategy sessions. If I find out there is a meeting scheduled where Democratic operatives are going to run it, I do not attend."

And besides, he said, "I've been married to the same woman since 1970, and I'm not looking to marry anybody else."

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Speaker overcomes illness to preach to Southern Baptists

By Mark Wingfield

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Four years ago, Ralph Smith wondered if he would ever stand to preach again. On June 16, he walked to the podium in Atlanta's Georgia Dome and delivered the convention sermon for the Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting.

Smith, who for 36 years was pastor of Hyde Park Baptist Church in Austin, Texas, suffers with Guillian-Barre syndrome, a debilitating muscular disease that forced him to take early retirement.

"You can't imagine what a joy it is to be standing, especially to be standing here today," Smith said as began the sermon. "It's great to be a Christian, but it's even greater to be a Southern Baptist Christian," he added.

In his sermon, Smith said his journey through illness and recovery has taught him about the sufficiency of God's grace and the invincibility of the church, the latter point being the topic of his message.

Drawing his text from Matthew 16, he outlined three reasons why the church is invincible: because of the transformed nature of its membership, its dynamic relationship to Christ and the unique spirit in which it does its work.

"The church takes sinners and teaches them the way to become saints," Smith said. "It takes children of wrath and makes them children of God.

This is possible, he said, because Jesus is both Christ and Son of God. "Jesus is God's anointed Son come to deliver us from our sins."

This deliverance transforms people, and these transformed people are the evidence of the invincible church, Smith said.

But the church also is invincible because of its dynamic relationship to Christ, he continued. The church, he said, is built upon Christ, built by Christ and successful through Christ.

This has profound impact for how the church should act, he insisted. "If Christ builds the church, we must not, we cannot, reject those Christ has chosen and placed in his church.

"We are called to respect, love, accept and honor one another. Together, we are the body of Christ. Every member is a vital part of Christ's body, the church."

Smith urged Baptists not to make mountains out of molehills, but to build up the entire body of Christ.

With this supernatural power from Christ, the church should march forward to success, he urged. "Our theme song is 'Onward, Christian Soldiers, Marching as to War.' The best days of Christ's church are before us. We must get our eyes off our tail lights and onto our headlights."

Smith predicted that "the biggest churches have yet to be built" and "the greatest victories have yet to be won."

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Portraying Southern Baptists to public a challenge for religion news writers

By Tim Palmer and Brittany Jarvis

ATLANTA (ABP) -- If you're a reporter for a daily newspaper, wading through the annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention and then conveying that experience to non-Baptist readers in a clear manner can be a challenge of biblical proportions.

Every year, secular papers from around America send reporters to the SBC annual meeting. Some of these reporters are novices who have no background information about Southern Baptists, while others are veteran religion writers who are knowledgeable about Baptist protocol and beliefs.

"It's a challenge to convey accurately to the readership" where Southern Baptists are coming from," said Cary McMullen, religion writer for a newspaper group owned by the New York Times.

McMullen has covered the SBC for three years. He attended divinity school and was a Presbyterian pastor. He also grew up as a Southern Baptist, so he understands the SBC better than some. But covering the convention is still a challenge, he said, noting it is difficult to keep up with everything and everyone.

Reporters may spend hours tracking down one person for one quote, said Patricia Rice, religion reporter for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. "People don't always know what is going on," she explained. "They are more informed about their pet issues and committees." And then to make the quotes and convention actions understandable to her secular audience, Rice said, she must explain basic things about Baptists in her stories.

Bill Singleton, religion reporter for the Birmingham (Ala.) Post-Herald, said he admires Southern Baptists' commitment to their faith and moral convictions, but that commitment is sometimes misunderstood by the public.

For example, Baptist actions such as resolving to evangelize Jews, condemning homosexuality and affirming wifely submission are shocking to the culture at large, he noted. So in his reporting, Singleton said he tries to give a historical perspective behind such actions. Singleton has covered nearly all the SBC annual meetings in this decade.

An African American, Singleton recalled one unpleasant experience at the 1995 SBC annual meeting. Messengers that year passed a resolution apologizing for past support of slavery, but a messenger he was interviewing made a derogatory reference to his race.

Yet Singleton, who is a Christian, said he does not characterize all Southern Baptists by the incident. "There are a lot of friendly people here," he said. "They're willing to talk to you."

Unfortunately for the SBC, it is easy for the media to make caricatures of Southern Baptists, McMullen said. Every public figure risks negative press coverage, he said, but many Baptists, including some leaders, instigate negative media focus.

"Anytime you have a group this large, you'll have some that draw attention to themselves, their pet causes or just generally be outrageous," McMullen said. "Some Southern Baptist leaders make deliberate efforts to make statements that will attract attention, and they do so in a flamboyant way."

The hardest part of covering the convention in recent years has been remaining on good terms with feuding sides of a conflict, said Jim Jones, veteran religion editor for the Fort Worth Star-Telegram. Jones, who has reported on the SBC since 1960, calls the conflict between Southern Baptist conservatives and moderates the convention's "holy wars."

"I would like to have seen the two groups work together," Jones said. "The two sides had strengths that complimented each other."

From his vantage point, Southern Baptists appear to be "very committed evangelical Christians," Jones said. "There's not a lot of difference in beliefs between the different groups of Southern Baptists, except they don't like each other."

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Supreme Court to decide validity aid program for parochial schools

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The nation's highest court has agreed to decide whether the government can furnish computers and other instructional aid to religious schools without violating the church-state separation terms of the First Amendment.

At issue is a 33-year-old federal program that provides certain instructional equipment and materials to the nation's schools -- public, private and religious.

In a June 14 order, the U.S. Supreme Court said it will review a federal appeals-court ruling that struck down a Louisiana school district's implementation of the program because it violated church-state separation.

The decision invalidating the program by the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals is in conflict with a ruling by another appeals court upholding the same program in California.

The dispute is the first church-state case the Supreme Court has accepted since its 1996-1997 term, when justices, reversing a 1985 ruling, upheld the validity of government-provided remedial instruction at religious schools.

The Jefferson Parish program was first challenged by a group of taxpayers in 1985. Of the 46 Jefferson Parish private schools participating in the federally funded program, 41 are parochial schools.

In striking down the program, the 5th Circuit panel cited 1970s Supreme Court rulings that upheld the loan of textbooks but not equipment to parochial schools. It rejected arguments that the program satisfied the standards set in the high court's most recent church-state rulings.

Asking the high court to reverse the 5th Circuit ruling are a group of parents whose children attend religious schools in Jefferson Parish.

Arguing their case, University Utah law professor Michael McConnell noted that lower courts have expressed the need for further guidance on what the 5th Circuit called "the vast, perplexing desert" of the Supreme Court's pronouncements on church-state separation.

"When lower courts candidly admit that they are confused about the law, it is time for this Court to speak," McConnell wrote.

He argued that the case involves the "vital interests of American schoolchildren in obtaining access to modern technological equipment and materials."

The high court he said, should hear the case to resolve lower court conflicts in the area and to confirm that the Constitution does not bar religious school students from participating in the federal government's educational enhancement programs on "an equal basis with all other schoolchildren."

The group of taxpayers who challenged the program told the high court that providing educational equipment to parochial schools is unconstitutional because it constitutes "direct aid" to the schools and because the items furnished can be easily used for sectarian purposes.

The taxpayers argue that the assertion by parochial school parents that computers and CD-ROMs are an essential part of education makes the case that the program "is providing substantial aid to the religious mission of the sectarian school."

In a brief filed by attorney Lee Boothby, the taxpayers asked, "If computers, why not desks, blackboards and copiers? Where would the line be drawn?"

The Clinton administration urged the Supreme Court to review the case. The high court's decision in the case would impact a proposal to revamp the federal program and spend \$800 million to help schools gain access to advanced technologies, telecommunications and web-based learning resources.

In a separate case, the high court declined to intervene in a Seventh-day Adventist college's attempt to receive funding under a Maryland program that aids private colleges in the state.

After state officials rejected the aid request submitted by Columbia Union College in Takoma Park, Md., the school filed a lawsuit in federal district court alleging that the denial violated its First Amendment rights.

In dismissing the claim, a federal district court held that the First Amendment bars funding of "pervasively sectarian" institutions such as Columbia Union.

In 1976, a Supreme Court plurality upheld the participation of other church-related colleges in the Maryland program after concluding that those schools, while "religiously affiliated," were not "pervasively sectarian."

A federal appeals court agreed that past Supreme Court rulings bar "a direct transfer of monies to a pervasively sectarian institution to fund its core educational functions" but said the district court's conclusion that Columbia Union is pervasively sectarian requires more evidence.

The appeals court said the district court examined the college's written policies but failed to examine its practices. It returned the case to district court with instructions to examine practices at Columbia Union "to determine whether religious indoctrination pervades the institution."

In asking the high court to intervene, attorneys for the college argued that such a close examination of the college's practices would involve "forbidden intrusion by courts into matters of religion."

They also argued that when aid is distributed according to a neutral formula and earmarked for secular uses, "the intrusive and constitutionally suspect 'pervasively sectarian' analysis need not be undertaken at all."

Justice Clarence Thomas, who dissented from the high court's refusal to hear the case, called for the court to abandon the test.

"We should take this opportunity to scrap the 'pervasively sectarian' test and reaffirm that the Constitution requires, at a minimum, neutrality not hostility toward religion," Thomas wrote.

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END
