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Baptists in Nashville debate 'trail of blood' in newspaper

By Bob Allen

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- A column in a Tennessee newspaper linking a string of Southern Baptist Convention controversies to a little-known theology called the "trail of blood" drew a harsh response from a top denominational official.

The Nashville Tennessean published a column Dec. 26 by Robert Parham, executive director of the Nashville-based Baptist Center for Ethics. In the column, which appeared previously in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Parham noted recent criticism of Southern Baptists over targeted evangelization of Hindus and Jews, a 1998 call for wifely submission, the Disney boycott and other issues.

Parham suggested there is a common thread running through those controversies; he described it as "a crusading theology rooted in a flawed view of history."

Parham, who has a Ph.D. from Baylor and is a former staff member at the SBC Christian Life Commission, said Southern Baptists' penchant for criticizing and targeting others stems from a belief about Baptist origins called the "trail of blood."

The view, which is also called Landmarkism, was popular in the 19th century, but today most scholars dismiss it. It contends that Baptists are able to trace unbroken succession from early Christianity through a series of dissenting sects that were Baptist in everything but name. As a result, local Baptist churches are the only "true" church, while others, including Catholics and mainline Protestants, are regarded false religions.

Many of the historical groups listed in the trail of blood were persecuted for their views. Southern Baptists, Parham said, likewise believe they are being persecuted.

"The self-administered test for faithfulness to the trail of blood is how much resistance one receives from the larger culture," he wrote. "So, fundamentalists are not discouraged when they encounter opposition from Jews, Hindus and other Christians. Rather, their faithfulness is confirmed."

The newspaper ran a second column Jan. 6 written by Morris Chapman, president of the SBC Executive Committee. The headline termed Parham's column "misleading and malicious."

"One unacquainted with Baptists may get the impression Parham is a knowledgeable, astute and impartial observer of the Southern Baptist Convention, its leaders and its people," Chapman said. "In fact,

however, his commentary is little more than a diatribe in which a series of erroneous assertions, disparaging charges and pseudo-psychology are strung together on filaments of bitterness."

Chapman disputed Parham point-by-point on a number of issues.

Chapman denied there was a "right-wing takeover" of the SBC. He attributed a leadership change to common Baptists working through a democratic process.

He defended the SBC stance calling for husbands to love their wives and wives to submit to their husbands as "the direct, unequivocal teaching of the New Testament book of Ephesians."

He said the SBC encouraged Baptists to "avoid patronizing" Disney because of anti-family directions taken by the corporation.

He defended calls to pray for the conversion of Jewish, Muslim and Hindu peoples during their holy days, calling it "astonishing" when people express alarm over Southern Baptists' commitment to evangelize all people.

"The motivation for evangelism is not a mass persecution complex, as Parham insinuates, but love: love of God and love for people," Chapman said.

Chapman accused Parham of being "deliberately deceptive" in implying that Southern Baptists promote racism. As a former SBC employee, Chapman said, Parham "knows better."

Chapman termed "laughable" Parham's suggestion linking trail-of-blood theology to current events. "Not one Southern Baptist educational institution propounds that theology," he said.

Parham responded that leaders often refer to the SBC as the nation's largest "non-Catholic" or "evangelical" denomination, avoiding the term "Protestant," and that LifeWay Christian Stores still sell "The Trail of Blood," a booklet first published in 1931.

He also noted that Billy Graham has disavowed the method of targeting faith groups for evangelism.

Parham accused Chapman of "revisionist history" and "hiding harmful deeds and hateful words behind the Bible."

Baptist origins were once hotly debated among Southern Baptists. In the late 1800s, the president at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary came under fire for writing that Baptists invented baptism by immersion in 1641. William Heth Whitsitt resigned under pressure in 1899, but most modern written histories of Baptists today support his findings.

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Violence in Lebanon mars Baptist World Congress mood

By Robert O'Brien

MELBOURNE, Australia (ABP) -- Charles Costa felt alone amidst 7,000 Baptists -- grief-stricken that he could not be home in Lebanon to perform the funeral of two Baptist women allegedly murdered by Islamic militants.

Selwa Raad and her pregnant daughter, Sarah Yazbeck, were shot and mutilated Jan. 3 in Lebanon's escalating civil conflict. Sarah's husband, Jean, was wounded.

As the two women, members of a Baptist church about 60 miles north of Beirut, were buried in their homeland Jan. 5, fellow Baptists gathered in Melbourne, Australia, for the 18th Baptist World Congress.

Costa, pastor of Ras Beirut Baptist Church, performed Jean's and Sarah's wedding in early 1998 and grew close to them during premarital counseling.

"Jean called my house to ask me to officiate at Sarah's funeral, but I was already here in Australia," Costa said, trying to hold back his tears. "They were a great Christian couple."

Costa described himself as "emotionally and spiritually drained" as he attended the opening Baptist World Congress session Jan. 5

"That night's sermon uplifted and renewed me," he said of a sermon preached by H. Beecher Hicks Jr., pastor of Metropolitan Baptist Church in Washington, D.C.

Hicks, noting that many in the auditorium likely bore heavy burdens, emphasized an invitation of Jesus: "Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

The African-American preacher urged participants to say "yes" to that invitation and concluded his message by repeating "yes" in nearly a dozen languages.

Costa no longer felt alone in the crowd. He joined others in the audience as it picked up the cry and voiced "yes" in many languages.

"I said to the Lord, 'I'm weary and tired,'" Costa said, "and I turned it over to him."

The murders of the defenseless women "exemplify the darkest side of human nature," Costa reflected. "They exemplify cruelty and the demonic."

News accounts give conflicting information about how the women died, but Costa said they died after Islamic militants sprayed their door with automatic weapons, blew it open with grenades, and shot them and hacked their bodies into pieces.

Jean Yazbeck, a Lebanese Army sergeant on leave, ran upstairs to get his gun and killed three of the militants before being wounded in the leg and escaping, Costa said. Militants blew up the house.

"Jean is doing fine physically, but he is in shambles emotionally after seeing his wife -- pregnant with their first child -- and his mother-in-law die such a horrible death," Costa said.

"It's difficult on a human level to forgive this," Costa said. "I want to forgive them. I hope Jean can forgive them. This family and their church need the prayers of world Baptists.

"So does the Middle East with all its struggles, tensions and hatreds."

The Jan. 5-9 congress is the first major international church assembly in the year 2000. The congress, which meets every five years, organized in 1905.

The Baptist World Alliance now represents 43 million Christians, about 80 percent of the world's Baptists. The largest body linked to the BWA is the Southern Baptist Convention, which has about 16 million members.

Among events at the 18th congress was the anticipated election of a new president. Billy Kim, a pastor and broadcaster in Korea, has been nominated for the post. His election was not expected to be challenged.

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-- Ecumenical News International contributed to this report.

Pastor's concern for ethnic cleansing translates into international conference

By Shelley Henry

SAN MARCOS, Texas (ABP) -- One Texas pastor's concern about ethnic cleansing in far-away reaches of the world has shaped an international conference to be held later this month in Sweden.

Doug Tipps, pastor of First Baptist Church of San Marcos, Texas, has been instrumental in organizing

the Jan. 29-31 conference in Stockholm, where religious, political and humanitarian leaders from six continents will draft the "Stockholm Accords on Ethnic Cleansing" to renounce ethnic cleansing in all forms.

The conference is jointly sponsored by Global Strategies for Religious Liberty, of which Tipps is president; the J.M. Dawson Institute of Church-State Studies at Baylor University; and the Church of Sweden.

Tipps said his vision for the Stockholm conference began about two years ago. Concerned about the effectiveness of his ministry at that time, he went through a period of soul searching. While seeking God's direction in his life, Tipps took a personal inventory.

"I wanted to determine what was important to me -- what was absolutely essential," he explained. "I began to put down in writing what my values were.

"I determined that to be free to think about God, to ask questions and to believe as God convicts my heart was of particular importance. Freedom is the best context to nurture the human psyche, and it is important for every person in the world. Freedom, I realized, was my bottom line value."

Tipps said freedom is a core value for all Baptists. "What have Baptists given to the history of Christianity? They have always insisted on religious liberty and freedom of conscience."

The importance of religious liberty became clearer to Tipps five years ago while on a mission trip to Romania. While walking down a street where Christian students had been killed by Ceausescu's forces at the beginning of the revolution, Tipps had an epiphany of sorts.

"I just stood there looking at pictures of these students that others had placed there as a memorial to them, and I wept," he said. "I became involved."

As a pastor, he had been involved with religious-liberty issues only on a small, localized scale. "I had been guilty of reducing religious liberty to a concept of 'I don't want the government looking into the church's affairs.'"

But the broader implications of religious liberty as a life-and-death concern in many parts of the world gradually became clear to him. "In Romania, I realized that here's where liberty is a matter of life and death," he explained.

As his desire to act grew into an imperative, Tipps became convinced one individual could make a difference. "We now live in the age of the empowered individual to do something never done before," he explained. "Today an individual can be even more effective than a government."

Tipps shared his ideas and visions with James Dunn, then director of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs in Washington. They proceeded to set up an international conference in London in July 1998 where about 150 religious and political leaders from 25 countries came together. One of the presentations at the "Beyond Mere Toleration" conference was given by Tipps himself. He shared with the audience a reinforcement of his belief in the importance of religious liberty and also outlined his vision for a second conference in Sweden.

After the London symposium, Tipps was ready for action. He gathered a team of advisers and volunteers, many from First Baptist Church, to develop "Global Strategies for Religious Liberty."

The name "Global Strategies" was selected to emphasize the commitment of the group to action rather than ideas. The upcoming Stockholm conference is by far the group's most ambitious undertaking. The conference will begin with a reception hosted by and in the home of U.S. Ambassador to Sweden Lyndon Olson. Objectives of the conference will be carried out during roundtable sessions and will culminate with the drafting of the Stockholm Accords.

Among the dignitaries who will attend the conference are Stanley Mogoba, president of the Pan African Congress; Ibrahim Rogova, the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize winner; Richard Stearns, president of World Vision; and Washington State Supreme Court Justice Charles Smith. Representatives from the United Nations, the United Way, the Carter Center, the Eastern Orthodox Church and Catholic Services Relief Center will be in attendance as well.

With most of the planning for the conference completed, the remaining hurdle is funding. "My focus right now is on raising money," Tipps said. "I'm not worried about it, though; in fact, I'm energized. I think there is a need for leaders to attempt seemingly impossible things."

One important outcome of the conference, Tipps said, will be the forming of personal relationships among the participants. "The key to all we are doing through Global Strategies is forming compassionate, caring relationships that can one day open doors to positive change," he explained.

Tipps said he is encouraged and grateful for the support First Baptist Church members have given his work with Global Strategies. The church has provided Tipps with release time for trips to London and Kosovo, as well as for the upcoming conference in Stockholm. Individual members have served on the advisory board of Global Strategies and have made financial contributions.

Working closely with Tipps, First Baptist member Jerry Bullock serves as executive director of Global Strategies.

Bullock described the work of Global Strategies as promoting the "vision of a world without religious walls -- a world where people are free to worship as their conscience dictates, unhindered either by law or by other religious bodies."

For Tipps, helping to fulfill this vision has become a life-long enterprise.

"I'm not just an event coordinator," Tipps concluded. "This is a vision and a work that will carry me through the last years of my life."

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-- Shelley Henry is a writer at San Marcos Baptist Academy.

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