



Associated Baptist Press

Editor: Bob Allen
Executive editor: Greg Warner

Phone: 800.340.6626
Fax: 904.262.7745
E-mail: bob@abpnews.com

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**Southern Baptist agency head
defends Falwell radio interview**

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON -- Officials of the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission "never endorse candidates for office," the agency's top official replied to a warning not to air partisan comments by a guest on the commission's weekly radio program.

ERLC President Richard Land wrote a letter June 21 to Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State. Land's letter responded to an earlier letter by Lynn asking that Land's agency not air certain comments by televangelist Jerry Falwell during a June 12 taping to be edited and aired later on the commission's "For Faith and Family" radio program.

Lynn warned that the Southern Baptist Convention's tax-exempt status could be jeopardized if the ERLC airs the interview, because listeners would conclude Falwell's "partisan agenda has the official endorsement" of the denomination.

In an interview with Associated Baptist Press, however, Land said: "This is an attempt to threaten and an attempt by Mr. Lynn -- bully that he is -- to engage in prior restraint of our speech. Whatever decision we make considering that airing of our program with Dr. Falwell or with anyone else, Barry Lynn's opinions and his advice will have absolutely no influence or impact whatsoever."

Land added, however, that the agency "wouldn't air anything that we think would put our tax status in jeopardy." Land said if the show's producers needed legal advice, they could call on either Jay Sekulow, chief counsel for Pat Robertson's American Center for Law and Justice, or Randy Singer, an executive with the North American Mission Board.

Sekulow told ABP that he has given the ERLC advice and counsel on the dispute at the request of Land, who contacted him shortly after receiving Lynn's letter.

Sekulow said he believes Land's interview with Falwell is "completely within the law" and pledged "if there is a need for further legal assistance, Richard Land can count on us."

Sekulow's organization recently lost a legal battle to prevent the Internal Revenue Service from revoking the tax status of a New York church that had opposed Bill Clinton's candidacy for president.

Land said he expects the Falwell interview to air on "For Faith and Family" around the first week in July. He said the 40-minute tape with Falwell would have to be edited down to fit the roughly 18 minutes of space on the program.

During the radio interview, Falwell said: "Ronald Reagan would not have been president unless Bible-believing Christians in 1979 and 1980 by the millions said, 'We've had enough,' and threw Jimmy Carter out and put Ronald Reagan in, to put it bluntly. If we don't do the same thing Nov. 7 with Mr. Gore ... and get somebody in there to rebuild the moral values and fabric of this nation, we're going to be in the same mess or worse than we were in 1980."

Falwell defended his statements and blasted Lynn's charges in a phone interview with ABP.

"As a private citizen," Falwell said, "I'm working to elect George W. Bush in the same way I worked to elect Ronald Reagan. I'm not working any harder than Barry Lynn is working to elect Al Gore. He's not kidding anybody."

Falwell said, "If Barry Lynn threatened me with something like that, it would be all the more reason to do it."

Falwell said he told Land before the taping that "I was going to be pretty outspoken as a private citizen and if I were you, I would carefully select and use the comments that I am about to make."

But Falwell said, "Knowing Richard Land as I know him, Barry Lynn's threats would probably make it difficult not to run" the statements in the interview. Falwell added that he was clear in the interview that he was not speaking for the ERLC or Land but only as a private citizen.

But Falwell said that since the ERLC is an agency of the SBC -- with both Democrat and Republican voters -- and since the radio time slot is so short, "If I were Richard Land, I would not use the political statements I made as a private citizen ... I would air more of the issue-oriented comments that were made."

Land said he often makes "mental notes" while conducting interviews of portions that will be edited out for a variety of reasons. "There are things that Dr. Falwell said that I made mental notes of that I thought would end up on the cutting room floor for various reasons." But he said those edits would be made through their normal editing procedure.

Land added: "If Mr. Lynn wants to know which parts we choose to air and which parts we choose not to air ... he should listen to the program. It would do him good."

In the letter, Land tells Lynn that "your letter demonstrates a total misunderstanding of the way the Southern Baptist Convention operates." Land said Lynn's suggestion that Falwell's comments have the endorsement of the SBC because he is a "prominent" SBC leader is "not consistent with Southern Baptist polity, which emphasizes the autonomy of the local church and the priesthood of believers."

Land referred to Lynn's "thinly veiled threat" to file more complaints with the IRS if necessary and charged that Americans United is not as quick to file IRS complaints about churches that endorse Democratic candidates as for GOP ones.

"Is it or is it not the position of Americans United that anytime a church or other tax-exempt ministry opens its pulpit, microphone or other communication platform to a person involved in politics, it thereby jeopardizes its tax-exempt status?" Land wrote. "If that is your position, do you plan on threatening IRS complaints against those churches who open their pulpits to Democratic candidates, or only to those ministries who interview persons like the Reverend Falwell?"

Americans United released a fact sheet countering those claims. Of the 28 houses of worship and religious ministries that AU has reported to the IRS, eight arose from entities that endorsed Democratic candidates and 10 arose from endorsements of GOP candidates. Seven were related to churches handing out Christian Coalition voter guides. Three dealt with independent or other candidates.

Lynn said his organization is the only private group that has filed an official complaint to the IRS about the Buddhist temple that raised money for Vice President Al Gore's candidacy. AU also recently filed a

complaint against the church led by former U.S. Rep. Floyd Flake for introducing Gore as "the next president of the United States."

Lynn said IRS rules on tax exemption allow churches to speak about political issues but restrict them from endorsing or opposing candidates.

"I do not make veiled threats," Lynn told ABP "If [Land] does decide to take the statements that we complained about and air them, we will then be forced to report that activity to the IRS."

And he added, that if the ERLC "takes those quotes out in the edit, it will be because we sent [Land] that letter. There's just no other reason for him to do so."

Land said the ERLC program is dedicated to discussing issues and not advancing partisan political agendas.

"But we are not going to impose censorship on our guests," he continued, "particularly as a result of the threats of any organization to file a complaint with federal authorities, ... particularly when that complaint has no merit."

Land said he does not endorse candidates for office because "it is very difficult for people to separate me, the individual, from me, the head of the ERLC." And he added that God is not a Republican or a Democrat, "but God is pro-life."

Land said if he were faced with a choice between a presidential candidate who would raise his taxes and was pro-life versus another who would cut his taxes but was pro-choice, "I would vote for the unborn and against my pocket book every time. My vote's not for sale."

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Colson says Stanley wrong to remain pastor after divorce

By Mark Wingfield

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Southern Baptist leaders who have opposed no-fault divorce laws and criticized President Clinton for his moral lapses should not remain silent on the divorce of Charles Stanley, Chuck Colson said in a nationwide radio broadcast June 13.

Stanley, pastor of First Baptist Church of Atlanta and a former Southern Baptist Convention president, announced May 21 that he and his wife, Anna, had divorced. The couple had been separated previously and reportedly had experienced marital difficulties for years.

Five years ago, during a legal separation, Stanley told his congregation if the conflict turned to divorce he would step down as pastor. But when the divorce was announced, Stanley indicated he planned to remain as pastor of the Atlanta church.

A church spokesman explained that "God has positioned Dr. Stanley in a place where his personal pain has validated his ability to minister to all of us."

The congregation reportedly applauded when told Stanley would remain as pastor.

But Colson, founder of Prison Fellowship and himself a Southern Baptist, said he found both the church's rationale and the congregation's response unsettling.

"Have our churches become so accustomed to moral failure that we applaud it?" he asked in the radio commentary. "If this is the test of being a good shepherd, should we also endorse pedophiles as pastors so they can better empathize with people who commit child abuse? How far do you carry this preposterous argument?"

The church's explanation of why Stanley should remain as pastor is "pure Clinton-speak," Colson said. "Those of us who criticized the president for quibbling over words to defend his sordid behavior have to be even-handed. And what was wrong for Mr. Clinton is certainly wrong for the pastor of one of America's leading churches."

Stanley is widely known not only as pastor of the prominent Atlanta church but also as a popular television preacher through his "In Touch" broadcasts.

SBC leaders have freely criticized Clinton throughout his administration, even calling on his home church in Arkansas to expel him from membership. But to date, no SBC leader has publicly questioned Stanley's divorce.

"Stanley's decision places his fellow Baptists in a difficult position," Colson asserted, noting that in 1998 the SBC passed a resolution calling on states to revoke "no fault" divorce laws. "Yet now a former president of the convention is using these very same laws to secure a divorce without consequences."

"If Charles Stanley can do this, then how can Southern Baptists presume to speak to their neighbors about marital fidelity?" Colson asked.

Colson expressed personal admiration for Stanley as a minister, calling him a "good and faithful servant." However, he said, "he needs first a time for personal repentance and healing."

"Biblical standards for pastors are very high, and rightly so," Colson explained. "Given the already high divorce rate among Baptists, the last thing we need to do is to give one of our own leaders a pass, no matter how much we may respect him."

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William Jewell College names new president

LIBERTY, Mo. (ABP) -- An administrator at a Lutheran college in Iowa has been tapped as the 14th president of William Jewell College, a Baptist-affiliated liberal-arts school in Liberty, Mo.

David Sallee, vice president for enrollment management at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa, will assume the presidency at William Jewell by the start of the fall term, Aug. 28, officials announced.

Sallee was selected to the post following a nationwide search. He succeeds Christian Sizemore, the school's president since 1994, who will become chancellor with responsibilities in development and community relations.

Prior to taking his current job at the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America-related Luther College, Sallee worked eight years as vice president for enrollment management at Oklahoma Baptist University. He is a 1973 OBU graduate, with a master's degree from Pittsburg (Kan.) State University and a doctorate from the University of Oklahoma.

He and his wife, Mary, have two sons: Andrew, a recent graduate of William Jewell who now works as an admissions counselor for the college, and Patrick, a junior at Oklahoma Baptist University.

"We are confident that Dr. Sallee, with his proven record of relationship-building, is an ideal choice to lead William Jewell College into the 21st century," said Doyle Sager, a Missouri Baptist pastor who chaired the search committee.

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-- By ABP staff

Football-prayer ruling may hinder graduation prayers, scholar says

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A Baptist church-state scholar says the Supreme Court ruling banning formal prayers at high-school football games may influence similar disputes involving prayer at graduation ceremonies in public schools.

The ruling in "Santa Fe Independent School District vs. Doe" doesn't directly address the issue of graduation prayer, said Derek Davis, director of the J. M. Dawson Institute of Church-State Studies at Baylor University in Waco, Texas. "But the tone of it and the language included throws into question the process by which a majority vote names a student to lead in prayer at any kind of public-school event."

The June 19 Santa Fe decision ruled unconstitutional the district's policy allowing students to lead stadium crowds in prayer over the intercom to open football games. In a 6-3 decision, the high court said the policy amounted to school-sponsored prayer and violated the Constitution's Establishment Clause designed to prevent government from promoting religion.

Davis authored a friend-of-the-court brief in the case opposing the prayer policy. He was joined by the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs and the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.

The Supreme Court has said that outside ministers cannot be invited to deliver prayers at graduations in public high schools, but it has not ruled against student-led prayers that are non-proselytizing and non-sectarian.

However, the high court's latest ruling could affect pending cases challenging the method used to select a student to lead graduation prayers.

The Santa Fe policy, for example, allows students to elect a representative to lead an invocation or benediction at graduation ceremonies. The outcome, invariably, is a Christian prayer.

"Anytime you have a majoritarian process it violates the spirit of the Bill of Rights -- which in many respects is intended to protect minorities," Davis said in a discussion of the potential impact of the Santa Fe ruling on school districts around the nation.

Davis said he would not oppose a student who happens to have a place on the program, such as a valedictorian, from "offering a religious message."

"But that's different in that it is a spontaneous event," he said. Unlike the Santa Fe policy and others that are similar to it, "it's not a pre-programmed event."

Davis said he is "very much opposed to this majoritarian process which is carried with a guaranteed outcome," a Christian prayer. "I've never seen it be anything else."

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Politicians react to prayer ruling

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON -- In very short statements, the two leading presidential candidates have voiced opposing views on the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling against school-sponsored prayer to open public high school football games.

Texas Gov. George W. Bush, the expected Republican presidential nominee, issued a two-sentence statement. "Today's ruling is disappointing," he said pointing to the June 19 "Santa Fe Independent School District vs. Doe" ruling. "I support the constitutionally guaranteed right of all students to express their faith freely and participate in voluntary, student-led prayer," Bush added.

A spokesman for expected Democratic presidential nominee, Vice President Al Gore, said Gore also favors voluntary student prayer but affirms the Supreme Court ruling.

"He supports the decision by the Supreme Court," Gore spokesman Jano Cabrera told Associated Baptist Press. Gore "does support prayer in school and school-related events as long as the participation is truly voluntary and it follows the Department of Education guidelines," Cabrera said. But Gore feels the court reached the appropriate conclusion that the Santa Fe policy amounted to "government-sponsored prayer," he added.

The high court said Santa Fe's policy allowing students to elect another student to lead the stadium over the intercom in prayer placed too much power in the hands of the majority over minority faith groups.

Top U.S. lawmakers also reacted to the ruling, including Rep. Ernest Istook, R-Okla., who touted his failed effort in previous congresses to pass a constitutional amendment that would open the door for school-sponsored religious activities and tax-funded religious education and programs.

Istook said the ruling is the "latest step of using the First Amendment to oppose religion rather than to protect it."

He said the "distortion has become so entrenched that a Constitutional amendment -- such as the Religious Freedom Amendment I have sponsored -- remains a necessity to correct this abuse."

"Unfortunately," Istook continued, "we don't have the votes to win the necessary two-thirds support for such an amendment from the current Congress. I remain hopeful that this will change after this year's elections."

And House Republican Conference Chairman J.C. Watts of Oklahoma criticized the ruling. "I don't know how many members of the Supreme Court have faced down a 300-pound linebacker on the football field," he said. "I have, and I can tell you this: If you didn't pray before the game started you definitely will before it's over."

Meanwhile a religious group issued a statement in favor of the decision.

The National Council of the Churches of Christ said the high court upheld the principle "that it is not the business of government to sponsor and promote religious exercises in public schools."

The NCC said it supported the right of students to pray individually or in groups, "but in this instance the court wisely recognized that participation in these prayers might not be voluntary for all students."

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