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'Baptist Faith and Message' revisions create quandary for moderate Baptists

By Bob Allen

ORLANDO, Fla. (ABP) -- Recent revisions to the "Baptist Faith and Message" are creating a quandary for moderate Southern Baptists who now disagree with the denomination's official declaration of faith.

While the confessional statement adopted overwhelmingly by the Southern Baptist Convention June 13-14 in Orlando, Fla., is not binding on individual Baptists or their churches, it does define Southern Baptist beliefs for the general public. Previous editions of the confessional statement in 1925 and 1963 embraced a broad constituency of Baptists, but the 2000 statement narrows views on biblical authority and women's roles in the church and home.

Among those saddled with the revised statement are 1,800 of the denomination's 41,000 churches that support the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, a moderate splinter group that affirms female pastors and other views disputed in the latest rewrite.

For that reason, Fellowship officials at a late hour added two breakout sessions to discuss impact of the new "Baptist Faith and Message" to the schedule of the group's June 29-July 1 General Assembly, also in Orlando.

Gary Parker, Baptist Principles coordinator for the Atlanta-based CBF, said the restatement of Southern Baptist views does not directly affect the Fellowship, but leaders chose to discuss it because the SBC "has acted in ways that we think disturb our understanding of what it means to be Baptist."

Overflow crowds at both sessions testified to interest in the subject.

"The impression I get from all of this is there's a distrust of people to make up their own minds and be free," said David Hughes, pastor of First Baptist Church of Winston-Salem, N.C. "It reminds me of the medieval Catholic system, where the Church didn't even want you to own a Bible, much less read one, because you didn't have the ability to interpret it for yourself."

"In an attempt to eliminate 'aberrant thinking,' whatever that is, there's now a need to stay strongly and tightly accountable as you read Scripture," Hughes said. "It reflects a profound distrust in the ability of regular people to read the Bible."

In far-ranging discussions led by a panel, some said the new statement is the final straw and that the 10-year-old Fellowship should finally declare that it is no longer Southern Baptist.

"We've always been very reluctant to say anything about being separate from (the SBC)," said one speaker who did not identify himself. "Is it time that we admit we are not part of them anymore?"

Others wished it were that simple. About 90 percent of those present indicated that they attend churches that send money both to the Fellowship and SBC. Some who support the Fellowship as individuals said there is no CBF church in their community and that leaving the SBC would entail that they become a non-Baptist.

"It's kind of hard to drop the name Baptist out of your name when it's First Baptist Church," added panelist David Hughes.

An unidentified audience member said every Southern Baptist church is now perceived to share the disputed views because of "guilt by association." Others lamented that the new doctrinal stance would be used to hire professors at Southern Baptist seminaries and writers of educational materials for local churches.

Some said the theological battle that divided the SBC in the 1980s now moves to a new level.

"This has now become a local church and an association struggle," said Randall Lolley, former president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary.

"We've seen a sea shift," Lolley said. "This has so far been national and state. This puts it right in Peoria and on Main Street. This is going to become an acid test for any participation on the state or national level."

Parker, who moderated the session, said the issue in the Southern Baptist Convention is "no longer a power struggle but a shift in theology."

He said churches are now faced with an issue of "doctrinal integrity" about whether they can remain in the SBC. "I believe in all sincerity that there is a place to call this heresy," Parker said.

"This very much resembles a divorce that is never going to be closed until one side decides to walk away without getting everything he wants," said panelist Annette Hill-Briggs, whose church, University Baptist Church in Bloomington, Ind., was expelled from its association for calling her as pastor last year.

In hindsight, Hill-Briggs said, "Getting removed from your association is one of the most freeing things that can ever happen to you. I liken it to Jesus telling the ones on the boats, 'Leave it all.'"

Carolyn Hale, whose association in Savannah, Ga., also withdrew fellowship from her church for calling her as pastor, described the experience as "sort of like being kicked out of the Book of the Month Club."

"It's no big deal," she said.

After the ouster, Hale said the church reallocated the 5 percent of its budget that it had been giving to the association directly to ministries in the association's budget. "Your mission money can go where you want your mission money to go," Hale said, adding the reminder: "You can support missions through CBF. We have missionaries. They need our support."

Panelist Doug Dortch, pastor of First Baptist Church of Tallahassee, Fla., said the "Baptist Faith and Message" statement gives churches "an exciting opportunity" to revisit their church covenant.

"I don't think it would be appropriate for the (CBF) Coordinating Council to initiate some sort of committee to develop a confession of faith to reflect who we are," Dortch said, "because we are not a denomination."

"I think there is much we can do to define ourselves, not in reaction to the 2000 'Baptist Faith and Message,' but in response to it," Dortch said.

Panelist Cindy Henman Clark, a student at Mercer University's McAfee School of Theology in Atlanta, said the Fellowship should respond by educating churches about all that the Bible says about women in ministry and other issues and about church history. She suggested churches approach the subject "without hostility."

"We can disagree with what is in the 2000 'Baptist Faith and Message,' but we don't have to hate," she said.

Kelly Belcher of Spartanburg, S.C., suggested that Fellowship churches respond by calling more women as pastors.

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Cooperative Baptist Fellowship approves application to join Baptist World Alliance

By Kenny Byrd

ORLANDO, Fla. (ABP) -- Seeking to enhance its status among the world's Baptists, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship has voted to seek membership in the 95-year-old Baptist World Alliance.

Participants at the CBF's 10th annual General Assembly voted without opposition to apply to become the 197th member of the worldwide Baptist organization.

While the 1,800-church Fellowship, a shadow group for moderates in the Southern Baptist Convention, is not technically a denomination, leaders believe it meets membership requirements for the BWA, which the Atlanta-based CBF has long supported financially.

A thornier question might be how the application will be received by the Southern Baptist Convention, which provides about a fourth of the BWA's \$1.7 million annual budget and views the CBF as a competitor.

Randy Hyde, a member of the CBF Coordinating Council who led presentation of the recommendation at the General Assembly, said the application "does possibly place the BWA membership committee in a difficult position."

Hyde, pastor of Pulaski Heights Baptist Church in Little Rock, Ark., called the BWA membership application vote "one of the most important commitments" CBF has ever made. He urged the crowd to pray for BWA leaders, in order that "they might do the right and Baptist thing."

During a breakout session to discuss the proposal, participants raised questions about whether the lack of denominational status hurts the Fellowship's chances to gain membership and the SBC's influence in the BWA organization. Some were concerned about how SBC representatives to the BWA, including Jerry Falwell's son Jonathan, conservative leader Paul Pressler and other SBC officials, would react.

One participant in the discussion asked, "How many votes does it take to get us in, and how many votes does it take to get us out?"

But Coordinating Council members said it is unlikely the SBC could carry a majority influence in light of the BWA's organizational structure. Though not a denomination, officials said CBF meets criteria in BWA bylaws requiring that a member "have an identity of its own and shall not exist as an integral part of some other union or convention."

Hyde said the BWA reference to "integral" implied that a group would have to at least be valuable to another organization. "I don't think the Southern Baptist Convention thinks we are valuable," he said.

The recommendation to apply for membership states, "as an organized and distinct Baptist body, pursuant to our commitment to participate in the worldwide Baptist community, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship applies for membership in the Baptist World Alliance."

A BWA official present at the CBF gathering said it is unlikely the BWA membership committee could consider the application before next year. This year's meeting of the group, in Cuba, followed the CBF meeting by one week.

The Fellowship reduced the \$100,000 it had been contributing to the BWA to about \$20,000 in recent years because of budget constraints, said Beth Fogg, a CBF Coordinating Council member from Richmond, Va. Still, the \$20,000 contribution makes the CBF one of the top five givers to the BWA, behind the SBC and American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A.

Fogg said CBF officials "deliberately" de-linked an earlier proposal that this year's contribution be contingent on the BWA accepting the Fellowship's membership application. She said CBF officials felt to do otherwise would be "unchristian."

Philip Wise of First Baptist Church in Dothan, Ala., said BWA membership would provide CBF with "opportunities to do some things we want to do that at present we can't do effectively," including hunger relief activities and aid to impoverished areas. He said it would make CBF "a recognized player among Baptists in the world. We're not just some splinter group."

Wise said the membership would formalize what CBF participants are already doing -- working with the BWA.

Fogg said many CBF missionaries are asked abroad why the CBF is not a member of the BWA. "It will assist our missionaries on the ground," she said.

And Hyde said it would allow those associated with CBF to serve in BWA leadership positions without riding "on the coattails of the SBC."

"I'm not comfortable with that," he said.

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Church-state specialists identify threats to liberty

By Marv Knox

ORLANDO, Fla. (ABP) -- The greatest threat to religious liberty in America is a mindset that lumps religion in with secular pursuits and insists religious activity should be determined by majority control, church-state specialist Brent Walker warned.

Walker, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee, a Washington-based religious-liberty organization, and Melissa Rogers, the committee's general counsel, addressed "Religious Liberty at Y2K" in a discussion session during the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship's June 29-July 1 annual meeting.

"The most serious threat to (American) religious liberty is not religious persecution. This is the freest and most tolerant society in history," Walker said. Religious persecution is grave elsewhere, such as Burma, Indonesia and China, where religious hostilities often flare into physical violence, he noted.

"And religious liberty is not seriously threatened by insensitive bureaucrats who handle our zoning laws and implement local ordinances that impact churches," he added. "This is a problem, but it's not our most serious threat to religious liberty.

"The biggest threat is the mindset that calls for religious equality -- for religion to be treated equally with secular pursuits -- and insists on majoritarian control of religion."

In fact, the Bill of Rights to the U.S. Constitution is "counter-majoritarian," Walker said, explaining the first 10 amendments to the Constitution are designed to protect the rights of minorities, including religious minorities.

And the religious practice of all faiths is "best secured when government treats religion differently than secular institutions," he said.

For example, the hiring practices of a church appropriately are protected from the laws that control non-discrimination in hiring employees of a business, such as McDonald's. He said a Baptist church should be protected from being forced to hire a person of another faith as a minister. Similarly, churches also are exempted from some building codes that require businesses to construct expensive handicap-access ramps.

"Religious liberty is protected and preserved not by treating religion the same as secular activities, but differently," he stressed.

However, that idea has been diminished by recent Supreme Court cases, Walker lamented, pointing out some justices insist on applying the same rules to the free exercise of religion that they apply to secular activities.

"The court thinks in majoritarian terms (which do not account for the rights of minorities) and fails to protect religious liberty," he said.

But when government deals with support for or establishment of religion, "sometimes religion should be protected a little less," Walker added.

For example, the First Amendment prohibits government from funding religious schools or leading in religious practices, he said, noting such support for religion is unconstitutional because it illegally advances religion.

Unfortunately, he said, the Supreme Court has engaged in a "slow chipping away" of the longstanding principle that government should not support parochial schools. The most recent example just occurred, when the court affirmed the practice of government funding of computers for parochial schools in Louisiana.

On the other hand, Walker affirmed another new Supreme Court case, which ruled unconstitutional school-sanctioned prayers at football games in the Santa Fe Independent School District in Texas. "To its credit, the court was troubled by the (majority-vote) notion of who should say the prayer," he said.

The consistent link between government under-protection and over-protection of religion is concern for the rights of minorities and the preservation of religious liberty for all Americans, he said.

Looking to the 2000 elections, Walker added, "The upcoming electoral process ups the ante" on religious liberty. The next president is likely to appoint three or four Supreme Court justices, a high number considering many religious liberty cases are decided by 5-4 votes.

Another cause for concern is the politically popular concept of "charitable choice," Rogers said. It is the practice of providing government funds to churches and other charitable organizations to help them operate charitable and benevolence services.

"Religious organizations and churches that take tax dollars must consider this: When you take tax dollars, they will come with strings attached," she warned.

Charitable choice developed after the welfare reform of 1996, Rogers explained. Before that time, pervasively religious organizations could not take tax money for fear of violating the constitutional ban on government advancement of religion. But with increasing reliance on religious and charitable organizations to meet needs created by the absence of welfare, some advocates advanced the concept of government financial support for these initiatives.

"Charitable choice is a hot topic," Rogers acknowledged, noting both George W. Bush and Al Gore have advocated the concept.

But it is riddled with pitfalls, she added. "Although the law is continuing to develop, the risks are too great for religious liberty. Accountability will be great for groups that accept tax dollars."

Charitable choice will not be characterized by "shekels without shackles," she said. Any government funds will come with significant strings attached, and those strings could bind religious liberty, she predicted.

Heritage society honors former BJC executive

By Marv Knox

ORLANDO, Fla. (ABP) -- Now is the "golden hour" for defending the Baptist concept of soul freedom, James Dunn told members of the William H. Whitsitt Baptist Heritage Society at their annual meeting June 29.

The society presented Dunn with its William H. Whitsitt Courage Award. The society and award are named for the church historian who was forced to resign the presidency of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary a century ago after asserting that Baptists trace their beginnings to the 17th century. While the view was controversial at the time, Whitsitt subsequently has been exonerated by the overwhelming consensus of church historians.

Dunn recently retired as executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee, a religious-liberty watchdog organization based in Washington, D.C. He now serves as president of the committee's endowment.

"Soul freedom feeds the deep heart-hunger found in millions of persons seeking authenticity and immediacy in religion," Dunn declared. "If there's ever been a time when the world wanted what we Baptists at our best have, it's now. If there's ever been a time when we doubted our resolve to deliver soul liberty, it's now."

He referenced recent action by a Southern Baptist Convention committee appointed to revise the doctrinal statement the "Baptist Faith and Message." The committee initially omitted references to the terms "soul competency," "priesthood of believers" and "religious liberty," which many Baptists believe are hallmark Baptist principles.

The committee eventually reinserted "soul competency" and "priesthood of believers" into the statement, but specifically defined them under the "authority" of Scripture.

"Unless we boldly offer the competence of the soul before God, we shall have missed our golden hour," Dunn stressed. "All mission and evangelism are predicated on soul freedom. Religious liberty for any must be religious liberty for all, ... and Baptists know that in their innards. They urgently thirst for a faith that fills the God-shaped empty space in their souls."

Six words "characterize our soul-freedom message these days," Dunn said, noting soul freedom requires that religion be:

-- Personal. "Human personality is the only adequate medium for the self-revelation of a personal God," he said, quoting E.Y. Mullins, a Southern Baptist leader and theologian who led in drafting the 1925 version of the "Baptist Faith and Message" statement.

"We sing, 'I know whom I have believed,' not '... what I have believed,'" Dunn quipped.

-- Social. "The competence of the individual before God does not demand and in fact precludes Lone Ranger religion," he insisted. "No matter what critics left and right may say, autonomous individualism ... does not mean that everyone's church is one's own hat.

"The longing for community and social Christianity presupposes voluntarism. Without individual autonomy, there can be no authentic community, for folks to be herded together by some sort of semi-sacramentalism or joined in a crusade for social justice does not community make."

-- Experiential. "Theology comes out of our always-limited attempts to explain religious experience, not the other way around," he said.

He quoted Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German theologian and Christian martyr, who wrote, "No one can possess the word of God for a single instant other than in the doing of it."

-- Voluntary. Dunn cited a litany of Baptist characteristics that reflect the notion that they voluntarily embrace the faith and serve God together--"local church autonomy, democracy, anti-creedalism, personal interpretation of Scripture."

"That soul freedom bundle of belief changes everything," he claimed. "We come to God freely, or not really."

-- Pluralistic. "Pluralism does not mean moral relativism," he explained, noting pluralism recognizes other people hold different beliefs, but it does not affirm "whatever you do is fine."

"Christians must find a way to keep one's values and identity while living amongst other values that we can neither destroy nor approve. That's the kind of world we live in, and boycotts and targeting and arguments by assertion aren't the answer. ... Soul freedom does not fear pluralism."

-- Androgynous. "Yes, it's time for a sort of scriptural, spiritual androgyny -- gender blindedness," he said.

"Can you honestly take the whole message of Jesus, the spirit of the New Testament and the Spirit, the living Lord and all the verses that could be made prooftexts to prove an argument and believe that any of us mortals can tell God whom he may call to any aspect of ministry?"

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Fellowship leader describes qualities of 'missional' church

By Marv Knox

ORLANDO, Fla. (ABP) -- A church that fulfills Christ's mission makes disciples, expresses passion about the earthly kingdom of God, sees with a global perspective and embraces suffering, Daniel Vestal told participants at the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship General Assembly July 1.

The mission of the church is "rooted in the character and nature of God," insisted Vestal, the fellowship's coordinator, or top staff administrator, citing church strategist Darrell Guder.

"God sent the Son (Jesus)," Vestal explained. "The Son sends the (Holy) Spirit. The Father, Son and Spirit send the church. These movements within the holy Trinity form a missional view of God -- a community on mission."

Although the church's mission involves positive attributes, Vestal also defined the church by what it is not.

"The church is not a vendor of religious goods and services giving the gospel to the felt needs of consumers," he stressed. "The church is not a chaplain to society or a voluntary association. The church is people, not place, a community that is sent. It is going because it is sending."

The church's mission forms its identity; defining the essence of a church, Vestal said. He labeled four characteristics that shape the identity of a "missional church":

-- "A missional church makes disciples," he declared. "The mission is first of all to become disciples ourselves. We must always be seeking to understand more fully what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. We must immerse ourselves in the words and Spirit of Jesus. We must engage in those practices that will enable us to hear and follow Jesus.

"And as we do so, we will lovingly invite others to join us in the journey, and that invitation will be relational."

Too many churches fail to lead others to faith in Christ, Vestal lamented. "The reason many of our churches don't make disciples is we do not relate to non-disciples. The leadership and membership don't really know non-disciples, and if we know them, we hold them at a distance. We don't include them as part of our lives or seek to make them a part of our church."

The Christian's responsibility is to so positively relate to non-Christians that they want to accept Christ as their Savior, he said.

-- "A missional church is passionate about the kingdom of God on earth," he noted.

Too many churches follow agendas that lead them to serve themselves or to protect such cherished notions as tradition and political correctness, he said.

"I am so hungry for churches whose vision is not their own survival, or even their own growth, but the reign and rule of God in people's lives, in culture and in the world," he said.

Such a church "may or may not be Baptist, but it is foolish about the kingdom of God. It may be charismatic, sacramental, conservative or liberal in its theology, but it is passionate about the kingdom. It receives the kingdom. It serves the kingdom -- proclaims, represents and prays for the kingdom. It seeks to conform its ministry, its methods, its evangelism and ethics, its character and culture to the kingdom of God that is revealed and embodied in Jesus."

-- "A missional church is ... global in its vision and worldwide in its perspective," Vestal declared.

To illustrate, he told about a church in the Sudan, one of the poorest parts of Africa, that meets under a tree in a refugee camp. A card on the tree lists the church's name, Shekinah Glory Church. And underneath the name is the bold proclamation, "center for world evangelization."

That little church expresses the passion and concern for the world that is necessary in all churches, Vestal said.

-- "A missional church is one that embraces suffering," he proclaimed.

"It will first embrace its own suffering -- whatever inconvenience, discomfort or hardship that is involved in following Jesus," he said. "It will celebrate difficulties and discipline, because it knows this is the way to grow.

"It will not whimper or whine when, for whatever reason, it is limited, misunderstood, weak. These become the occasions to demonstrate the power and grace of God."

This embrace of suffering extends to others, he added. "Wherever there is suffering, you should find the church -- partaking of the suffering, seeking to understand it, to alleviate it, addressing its root causes and simply identifying with those who suffer. Like Christ, we embrace and enter the sufferings of people."

Finally, a missional church extends its reach to others, Vestal described.

"It is always going, because it is always being sent," he said. "It enters into God's mission because of divine initiative and participates in God's mission because of divine grace."