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**Baptists affirm diverse views  
in capital punishment debate**

By Trennis Henderson

HAVANA (ABP) -- As debate over capital punishment escalates in the United States and elsewhere, how do Baptists view the death penalty? As with many moral and social issues, it depends on which Baptist you ask.

The Southern Baptist Convention in June adopted a pro-capital punishment resolution for the first time in history. A few weeks later, Baptist World Alliance participants from the U.S. and Sweden presented a contrasting view in a pair of papers opposing the death penalty.

The SBC action describes the practice as "a legitimate form of punishment for those guilty of murder or treasonous acts that result in death." The resolution declares that God "established capital punishment as a just and appropriate means by which the civil magistrate may punish those guilty of capital crimes."

"God's Word has spoken clearly on the issue of capital punishment," Resolutions Committee chairman Hayes Wicker told SBC messengers. "We believe it is time to speak since the world is saying so much about it."

Meanwhile, the BWA's Christian Ethics Study Commission has been studying the issue for several months. Sven Lindstrom, general secretary of the Baptist Union of Sweden, and Charles Johnson, pastor of Second Baptist Church in Lubbock, Texas, presented papers affirming the principle of "restorative justice," even in capital murder cases.

"The question is not if they have done something they should die for," Lindstrom said. "The question is: Do we have the right to kill them? That is the ethical question."

Affirming the need to "work from a Christian perspective toward confession and reconciliation," Lindstrom said, "We as Christians need to emphasize the possibility of rehabilitation, recovery and restoration."

"God himself is the only one who has the right to give life and take life," he insisted. "We can go back to the creation and the dignity that is God-given regardless of the acts we commit."

Johnson presented a detailed 13-page paper contrasting Old Testament and New Testament views of capital punishment.

"The biblical material concerning capital punishment is varied and colorful," Johnson noted. "As with most profound moral issues, the Bible contains a diversity of viewpoints with regard to death as a criminal and moral punishment."

Johnson cited 21 specific crimes in the Old Testament for which the death penalty can be administered. The offenses range from murder, kidnapping and adultery to witchcraft, homosexuality and parental disobedience.

By contrast, Johnson said, Jesus "instituted the wonderful ethic" of selfless love.

"Historically, the way of Christ has informed the teachings of the church," Johnson emphasized. "Jesus locates the essence of the transgression not in the act itself but in the attitude behind the act."

Noting that Jesus moved beyond legalism "to promote his higher goal of reconciliation," he added, "The power of love and forgiveness must match and exceed the volume of violence."

Commission chairman Nigel Wright of Great Britain said refraining from exercising the death penalty "is not to say people do not deserve it."

"In strict retributive terms, the death penalty is deserved," he said. "The measure of our humanness and our Christianization in refraining from capital punishment says something good about our society."

The issue of capital punishment was among a number of issues discussed during commission and committee meetings held in conjunction with the BWA General Council meeting July 3-8 in Havana. Other topics ranged from "Emerging Issues in Theological Education" to "Living in an Ethical Minority in a Socialist Society."

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## **BWA resolution opposes sanctions affecting food, medicine in Cuba**

By Trennis Henderson

HAVANA (ABP) -- Economic sanctions against Cuba, racism and the sexual exploitation of children were among issues addressed in resolutions adopted by world Baptist leaders in Havana.

More than 400 international participants attended the Baptist World Alliance General Council July 3-8 at Calvary Baptist Church in Havana. It was the first international Baptist event in the history of the socialist nation.

Citing "the pain and suffering endured by innocent persons as a result of the imposition of international economic sanctions" in nations around the world, council members approved a resolution that specifically encourages "initiatives to ease sanctions on food and medicine affecting the people of Cuba." The United States government has maintained a strict economic embargo against Cuba since early in Fidel Castro's 41 years of control there.

Describing access to food and medicine as "a basic human right," the resolution emphasizes that "the denial of such access should not be used by nations as a tool of geopolitics."

In addition to highlighting needs in the council meeting's host nation, "we also are addressing several countries that are engaged in similar sanctions," explained resolutions committee chairman Keith Jones, rector of International Baptist Theological Seminary in the Czech Republic.

Underscoring "the urgency of the need for all nations and peoples to respect and support the human rights of all," the measure calls on churches to "take steps to express their solidarity with oppressed people."

Morris Chapman, president of the Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee, proposed deleting a phrase calling on governments to remove economic sanctions.

"We have taken a strong stand on human rights," Chapman affirmed. "I'm grateful we have had the courage to speak to the Cuban issue particularly."

He voiced concern, however, that a global call for governments to end economic sanctions is "a very sweeping statement that goes beyond what the intent of this resolution is."

"All of the weight here is upon the country that applies the sanctions, but there is no weight upon the country that causes the oppression," Chapman said. "We are asking countries to remove sanctions when we do not know all the countries that are applying sanctions."

Terry Ray of South Africa said his nation needed the pressure of international economic sanctions to force leaders there to end apartheid. Rather than dropping the resolution's call for governments to halt economic sanctions, he proposed that the resolution's language be linked specifically to sanctions affecting food and medicine.

After Chapman withdrew his proposal in favor of Ray's wording, council members adopted the amended resolution calling for governments to "remove economic sanctions that relate to food and medicine."

During a private meeting with BWA leaders the next day, Castro wrote a note to council members thanking them for adopting the resolution.

Even with Castro's endorsement of the measure, BWA leaders insisted the action was not political.

"We were not here to affirm any ideology or government, but to affirm the people of Cuba," emphasized BWA General Secretary Denton Lotz. "The Cuban people are the ones suffering from the boycott."

"I believe the resolution is not political," agreed BWA President Billy Kim of Korea. "When people are suffering and the Baptist family is persecuted, if we don't make a statement we are sinning against our brethren."

"If we don't express our concerns, we are not doing our job as a world organization," he added. "As a world body, we need to stick together to help out those people who are so weak."

Victor Gonzales, general secretary of the Baptist Convention of Western Cuba, said the resolution is significant for Cuban Baptists.

"Our whole people will appreciate the resolution," he said. "Much suffering has been withstood by our people during these years."

The resolution addressing racism affirms efforts to pursue a decade of racial justice. Encouraging member bodies to "promote programs to combat racism and ethnic violence around the world," the statement offers the resources of BWA "to assist in resolving issues of racism and ethnic conflict, including approaching national governments in areas where racism and ethnic conflict are evident."

The measure opposing sexual exploitation of children described it as "one of the most vile forms of child abuse."

Noting that "children all over the world are subjected to abusive relationships perpetuated by adults and tolerated by communities and governments," the resolution calls on Baptist groups "to oppose the sexual exploitation of children wherever it exists, to provide aid and comfort to the children who are the victims of such abuse and to pray for all children everywhere."

Council members also adopted resolutions affirming the ministries of global missions and theological education.

In other business, council members adopted a \$2 million budget for 2001. The budget, which includes \$775,000 from member bodies around the world, is a 13 percent increase from the current budget.

Members also approved 2001 funding goals of \$2.7 million for Baptist World Aid, the Alliance's disaster relief and development organization. Proposed projects range from reconstruction work in Liberia and Sierra Leone to relief efforts in Chechnya and North Korea.

## **Tax form allowing ministers' return to Social Security plan now available**

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The Internal Revenue Service has made available the form allowing pastors and other religious ministers to re-enter the Social Security program that, among other benefits, provides seniors with Medicare health coverage.

Ministers who previously opted out of Social Security because of religious objections but now want to re-enter must file Form 2031 by April 15, 2002. They can elect to make their re-entry effective in tax year 2000 or 2001 by filing the form titled "Revocation of Exemption From Self-Employment Tax for Use by Ministers, Members of Religious Orders, and Christian Science Practitioners."

If pastors elect 2000, however, they will be liable for self-employment taxes this year. Ministers, who had previously opted out of the program, should file Form 2031 before filing their tax returns for the year they wish to make re-entry effective.

They can obtain the two-page form along with its instructions online at [www.irs.gov](http://www.irs.gov) in the forms and publications section.

Priests, rabbis and other ministers have long been able to exempt themselves from paying Social Security taxes if they object to the program on religious grounds. However, once a minister decides to opt out, it is irrevocable.

Congress opened a temporary two-year window for ministers wishing to re-enter the program in a measure approved in November 1999.

Deirdre Halloran, associate general counsel at the U.S. Catholic Conference, told Associated Baptist Press that several years ago some ministers "got bad advice" on opting out of the program. As they near retirement, those ministers "wake up and smell the coffee," she said, and realize that as a consequence of opting out, they will not receive Social Security benefits, including Medicare coverage.

Halloran said only pockets of ministers opted out of the Social Security system in the first place, but she advised they take this opportunity to buy back in. "We don't believe that any future Congress is going to look kindly on reopening this issue somewhere down the road," she said.

Congress last provided a window for ministers to re-enter the program in 1986.

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## **House approves measure clarifying church health plan federal status**

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A law passed by Congress and signed by President Clinton July 10 encourages insurance companies to offer health plans for religious denominations.

The Church Plan Parity and Entanglement Prevention Act clarifies that church health plans are considered "single employer" rather than "multiple employer" plans. It also minimizes the regulatory reach of states over church-benefit programs.

Sponsors of the legislation and religious leaders said the measure was needed because the ambiguous status of church plans made health-insurance providers wary of violating state laws by offering them.

Designating church health plans "single" employer lowers that risk, because those programs are less vulnerable to state regulation than "multiple employer" plans.

Rep. John Boehner, R-Ohio, said the legislation "is a common-sense change we can take while continuing to protect churches against unnecessary government interference in their affairs."

Supporters of the measure included The Church Alliance, a group of 32 Catholic, Protestant and Jewish denominational benefit programs.

In a written statement to Associated Baptist Press, Rod Miller, vice president, general counsel and secretary of the Annuity Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, said: "We are grateful that Congress has again recognized the unique nature and needs of church health plans. The recently enacted legislation should assist the Annuity Board in its ministry of providing medical coverage alternatives for Southern Baptist ministers, employees and their families."

Another member of the alliance is the Ministers and Missionaries Benefit Board of the American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A.

Sumner Grant, executive director of the M&M Board said the law "is a very important piece of legislation for the church-benefit community." He said it clarifies that church plans, such as those run by ABC "are not insurance companies for state law purposes."

Grant said one health provider had to stop providing third-party administrative services for the M&M Board because of the precise concern that the new law remedies.

"Many health service providers have been reluctant to do business with our health plans for fear that they themselves may violate state insurance rules. This law clears all of that up," Grant said.

Grant said the new law gives church health plans "more potential in vending out our services now that our status is clarified."

The Baptist principle of autonomy of the local church also played a role in the matter, Grant said.

If the M&M Board had been willing to call itself a single employer and not an association of churches, it would have made it much easier to meet state insurance requirements. "But for Baptists," Grant noted, giving up that distinction "is a problem."

David Starr, a Washington lawyer who represents The Church Alliance, said Catholic and Episcopalian health plans could more easily argue they are single employers because of the "hierarchical nature" of those denominations. A Baptist denomination, meanwhile, where each congregation is self-governing, "would have greater difficulty," he said.

Starr said the new law makes certain that "each church plan is treated equally, regardless of their religion's form of governance."

The law clears up ambiguity caused by an exemption for religious groups in a 1974 law that protects workers' pensions by setting uniform standards for private health and benefit plans.

Religious leaders fought for and won the exemption from burdensome portions of the Employee Retirement Income Security Act, known as ERISA, because of the separation of church and state.

While the exemption helped church plans, it left their status in question and vulnerable to different regulations in different states.

The new law adds protections for church plans similar to ways that ERISA shields other corporate and private plans from state laws, while allowing church plans to continue to be exempt from ERISA.

Starr said the exemption from ERISA sought by churches 25 years ago "is as important today as it was then."

In testimony delivered in 1986 to the Senate Finance Committee urging that lawmakers keep the exemption from ERISA for churches, the alliance said the First Amendment requires that "churches are different and must be treated differently from private sector organizations in a legislative setting."

## **Sisemore defines statement on Bible**

By Marv Knox

FLOYDADA, Texas (ABP) -- The Texas pastor who at the recent Southern Baptist Convention described the Bible as "just a book" claims his words have been widely misunderstood.

"Seven words taken out of context have caused quite a stir," Anthony Sisemore noted, understating the maelstrom that has circulated around a speech he made at the June 13-14 SBC annual meeting in Orlando, Fla.

Sisemore, pastor of First Baptist Church in Floydada, Texas, has been quoted widely for saying, "... the Bible is still just a book," during discussion of the "Baptist Faith and Message" article on Scripture. He made the statement during debate on his motion to restore portions of the Scripture article in an earlier version of the statement adopted in 1963.

Conservative SBC leaders seized upon Sisemore's quote as Exhibit A for their long-running allegation that so-called moderates have a low view of Scripture. Baptist Press wrote an article quoting pastors and theologians lambasting Sisemore's statement. Prominent pastors preached against the "just a book" theme. Some have suggested Sisemore's words represent views of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, though Sisemore is not a member of the moderate splinter group.

"It's been completely misinterpreted and taken out of context," Sisemore said in an interview with the Baptist Standard newspaper, discussing his speech at the annual meeting.

"My statement, '... the Bible is still just a book,' was preceded by a statement about my beliefs about the Bible," he said. "I did not expect to create a stir. I believe the Bible is God's word."

In his address to the convention, Sisemore stressed his faith in the Bible.

"Without any hesitation, I believe the Bible is God's word, and I strive to obey the standards it prescribes," he said at the annual meeting. "The Bible is a book that we can trust. The Bible is a book that points toward the Truth.

"With that being said, the Bible is still just a book. Christians are supposed to have a relationship with Jesus Christ, the Living Word, not a book. Jesus Christ redeems us, not a book."

He quoted to messengers words about Jesus from the first chapter of the Gospel of John: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" and from the same book's 14th chapter, "Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one can come to the Father but through him."

"If Christ is the Word and the Truth, then he is the answer and the revelation," Sisemore said in Orlando. "One must see the Bible is a record of what Christ has done and will continue to do until his return.

"I trust everyone present will understand that Christ is the revelation of God. He is not the focus of divine revelation; instead, he is the full revelation of God.

"He is the standard by which Christians must measure everything. Brothers and sisters, today we must be careful not to elevate the written record above the one to whom it points.

"The Bible is a record that focuses on the Word, Jesus Christ, who is God's revelation to humanity."

Later, in an interview, Sisemore said he did not mean to imply the Bible is just an ordinary book.

"It's not to be equated with 'Tom Sawyer,' say, or 'For Whom the Bell Tolls' which were 'just' books," Sisemore explained.

"I said it's 'just a book' in that it's not to be worshipped. What I mean is, yes, it's God's word to us. It is God's truth. It is God's guide for us.

"But we do not have a relationship with it. The book -- the Bible -- is not what redeems us. Only Christ redeems us."

Still, Sisemore said, he wants Baptists to know he unequivocally affirms the Bible.

"It has withstood the test of time because it has God behind it," he said.

Lifting words out of context can significantly change their meaning, he said, adding that the out-of-context treatment his statement has received skews its meaning.

For example, SBC Paige Patterson said, "All Texans are liars," Sisemore said, stressing the statement was made in jest.

"But he said those words. They can be misconstrued if taken out of context."

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EDITOR'S NOTE: The spelling of Anthony Sisemore's last name is correct in this story. It has been misspelled in previous stories.

**END**

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