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**IN THIS ISSUE:**

- SBC's new 'Faith and Message' isn't 'Baptist,' Texas pastor tells moderate group**
- Two Baptist papers face new restrictions**
- Jubilee 2000 debt-relief supporters win increased funding**
- 'Charitable choice' amendment fails in Senate tax legislation**

**SBC's new 'Faith and Message' isn't 'Baptist,'  
leading Texas pastor tells moderate group**

By Mark Wingfield

CORPUS CHRISTI, Texas (ABP) -- The newly revised "Baptist Faith and Message" is not a Baptist statement of faith, and those who affirm it "cannot be understood to be historic Baptists," the pastor of Texas Baptists' top missions-giving church claimed July 15.

This presents Baptists in the largest state affiliate of the 15.8 million-member Southern Baptist Convention with an opportunity to "move beyond the Baptist battles" by identifying themselves as Texas Baptists and reclaiming the heritage behind the name "Baptist," said Jim Denison, pastor of Park Cities Baptist Church in Dallas.

Denison made the comments during a keynote speech at a Cooperative Baptist Fellowship breakfast during the July 14-15 convocation of Texas Baptists Committed in Corpus Christi.

The convocation program explored topics related to the "Baptist Faith and Message," both as it was adopted in 1963 and as amended by SBC messengers in June. Those changes -- particularly removing a statement that Jesus Christ is the criterion by which Scripture is to be interpreted and inserting a ban on women serving as pastors -- have been criticized among moderate Baptists nationwide and especially in Texas.

"The Southern Baptist Convention is now a different denomination theologically," said Denison, who has a seminary doctorate.

The convention "has adopted a statement of faith which departs from historic Baptist views of authority, hermeneutics and ecclesiology," Denison charged. "In short, the Southern Baptist Convention is no longer Baptist as Baptists have traditionally defined themselves."

Given this understanding, he added: "We must claim our heritage and identity as Texas Baptists. Now we know who the Southern Baptist Convention is and will be. And we know who we are."

"We are Baptists -- Texas Baptists," he said, emphasizing the word "Baptists."

Denison said Texas Baptists, whose leaders are more moderate than conservatives leading the national body, "believe in biblical, non-creedal authority for our faith." The state's Baptists also "believe in a Christ-

centered message and hermeneutic," he said, and "local church autonomy and freedom for ministry and mission."

He quoted a line from Shakespeare to suggest that Texas Baptists have a window of opportunity to stake a claim for what they believe: "And we must take the current while it serves, or lose our ventures."

"We must move beyond the Baptist battles by being historic Baptists," Denison said. "Let us exercise our freedom and autonomy to preach Christ, not creed. Let us move beyond the bitter rancor, the name-calling and slander, the internal, myopic focus produced by 20 years of controversy. ... We can end the Baptist battles in Texas by being Texas Baptists."

Denison articulated three reasons why he believes the "Baptist Faith and Message" as revised by the SBC in June is not a Baptist statement of faith:

-- Authority. He cited newly inserted phrases that call the "Baptist Faith and Message" an "instrument of doctrinal accountability" and say that its doctrines are "essential to the Baptist tradition of faith and practice."

"For the first time, the denominational faith statement is intended to be an 'instrument of doctrinal accountability,'" he reported. "For whom? By whom? Now we understand the exclusion of the statement, 'Such statements have never been regarded as complete, infallible statements of faith, nor as official creeds carrying mandatory authority.'

"And for the first time, this faith statement is said to be 'essential to the Baptist tradition of faith and practice.' Essential for what? For whom? Perhaps this sentence explains the exclusion of the 1963 statement, 'The sole authority for faith and practice among Baptists is Jesus Christ, whose will is revealed in the Holy Scriptures.'"

Both the phrases he cited as omissions were included in the 1963 "Baptist Faith and Message" but were not carried over in the 2000 version. Charles Wade, BGCT executive director, attempted to get SBC messengers in June to reinsert the section about Jesus being the sole authority for faith and practice, but his amendment was soundly defeated.

"Simply put, a document which elevates such a human statement of faith to this level of authority cannot be understood to be Baptist," Denison said. "And those who affirm it cannot be understood to be historic Baptists."

-- Hermeneutics, or the framework by which a person interprets the Bible. The 1963 "Baptist Faith and Message" said, "The criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted is Jesus Christ." The new statement says instead, "All Scripture is a testimony to Christ, who is himself the focus of divine revelation."

The difference between these two statements is "gigantic," said Denison, who previously taught hermeneutics at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and wrote his doctoral dissertation on the subject.

"Now, for the first time, Baptists are to interpret Scripture without the Christological hermeneutic which has characterized our theological history," he said. "One of the interpretive principles we inherited from our Anabaptist forefathers made clear the fact that the New Testament interprets the Old Testament, and the statements of Jesus are the means by which we interpret the rest of God's inspired word."

In practical application, this principle means Christians ask, "What would Jesus say?" and "What would Jesus do?" he explained.

But the "Baptist Faith and Message" as revised does not allow room for such questions, he said, and therefore is not a Baptist document.

-- Ecclesiology, or the way churches function and relate to one another. To illustrate a change in this area, Denison cited new language that prohibits women from serving as pastors.

While neither arguing for or against women serving as pastors, Denison said this declaration by the SBC infringes on the role of local churches to interpret Scripture and discern God's will.

"Baptists have always championed the principle of local-church autonomy," he said. "We have made clear the fact that a local congregation can do exactly as it pleases in seeking and following God's will. Nowhere is this freedom more crucial than in the matter of pastoral selection and leadership."

"Make no mistake. This has never been done in the history of Baptist confessions of faith," he added. "Simply put, a document which intrudes upon local-church autonomy in such a restrictive manner as this cannot be understood to be Baptist. And those who affirm it cannot be understood to be Baptists."

Even though many Baptists disagree with the changes made by the SBC to the "Baptist Faith and Message," these changes will be "normative and formative" for the SBC in the years ahead, Denison predicted.

And that, combined with the ongoing SBC controversy of the past 20 years, has "created a massive obstacle to effective ministry and missions," he asserted, citing recent market research done by his church.

The church employed a secular marketing firm to conduct nine focus group interviews with unchurched residents of North Dallas, Denison explained. Those interviewed were asked to rank Baptists, Catholics, Methodist, Pentecostals and the Church of Christ on identification by certain words.

Baptists ranked first in words such as "pushy," "self-serving," "cliquish," "discriminates," "fundamentalist" and "hateful," he reported. Conversely, Baptists ranked next-to-last in descriptions such as "loving," "diversified," "open-minded" and "modern."

The marketing firm concluded that, "The single greatest impediment to our church's ability to communicate the gospel in our culture is the fact that we are a Baptist church," Denison said. "How ironic that a denomination formed to obey the Great Commission is now our church's greatest obstacle to its fulfillment?"

The way around that dilemma, he suggested, is to reclaim a more positive Baptist heritage. The SBC no longer represents historic Baptist ideals, but Texas Baptists can and do, he said.

"I am who I was, but the Southern Baptist Convention is not what it was. They have moved from me, not I from them. They have moved from us, not we from them."

Although Denison did not mention convention-funding issues in his message, it was delivered in the context of a two-day meeting filled with talk of changing the BGCT's budget in October to reduce funding for at least some SBC agencies and institutions.

David Currie, executive director of Texas Baptists Committed, urged those at the meeting to return to Corpus Christi in October for the BGCT annual session, which will be held just blocks away from where the Texas Baptists Committed event convened. Currie urged them to bring a full slate of messengers from their churches to vote in favor of BGCT budget changes that are expected either to be proposed in the convention's budget or made through motions from the floor.

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## **Two Baptist papers face new restrictions**

By Tony Cartledge

RALEIGH, N.C. (ABP) -- Readers of the Georgia Baptist Christian Index will have to look elsewhere for news or commentary about the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship following a recent action by the paper's board of directors. And in South Carolina, the Baptist Courier staff has been instructed to refuse all advertising from state or national CBF entities pending the final report of a study committee.

CBF consists primarily of churches and individuals dissatisfied with the current direction of the Southern Baptist Convention. The group traces its genesis to August 1990, and was officially organized in May 1991.

Though preferring to call itself a "fellowship" rather than a "convention," CBF has developed a missions-sending agency and an organizational structure similar to traditional conventions. The group currently lists 1,800 participating churches, supports 150 missionaries, and approved an annual budget of almost \$17 million at its June 29-July 1 meeting in Orlando, Fla.

While supporters see participation in CBF as a logical alternative for churches and individuals disillusioned with the SBC's current direction, many SBC loyalists view CBF as a competing convention that is aggressively seeking to draw churches -- and their money -- away from the SBC.

This perception prompted directors of the state Baptist papers in Georgia and South Carolina to take steps toward squelching the inclusion of CBF news or advertisements in their publications. Both boards now consist entirely of members who support the SBC's conservative shift.

Bill Neal, editor of the Christian Index for six years, has been very sparing in the space given to CBF news items or advertisements, even though CBF's central offices are located in Atlanta. Nevertheless, the 11-member board of the Christian Index adopted a policy May 20 that the newspaper should "in no way publish announcements, advertisements or editorials regarding this group" and "that no news items related to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship be published in the Index with the exception of those news items which the editor believes directly affect Georgia Baptists and/or Southern Baptists."

The motion further directed the editor to consult with Georgia Baptist Convention Executive Director Bob White, who is treasurer of the Christian Index board, or with other board members if he thinks future CBF news items are newsworthy, so that they might "share the heat of making those decisions."

Neal confirmed the board's action but declined further comment.

Board chairman Dave Parker, pastor of First Baptist Church of Duluth, Ga., gave a reporter excerpts from the minutes of the meeting. While noting that he could not speak for the entire board, Parker said there was a consensus that, "Some folks involved with the Fellowship have demonstrated themselves to be in direct competition on a consistent basis for Georgia Baptist Cooperative Program Missions support dollars."

Board members "felt that this competition has created unhealthy angst and confusion among some of our Georgia Baptist members and churches," Parker said. "Therefore, the board did not feel it wise to be supportive of the CBF by reporting the Fellowship's advertisements, information or events in the official organ of Georgia Baptists, except where that information was newsworthy and relative to Georgia Baptist and Southern Baptist issues and concerns."

Most of Georgia's 150 churches that currently support CBF through their church budgets also contribute to the GBC's Cooperative Program, said Frank Broome, coordinator of Georgia's CBF chapter. Georgia Baptist churches are not allowed to contribute funds to state or national CBF causes through the GBC's budget plans, however.

Broome said many Georgia Baptist churches, including some of the more conservative churches, have decreased the percentage of their contributions to the Cooperative Program, but most were using the difference to fund local ministries and missions, rather than sending it to CBF. "What's happening is broader than CBF," he said. Broome said the Georgia CBF's publications have never promoted competition with GBC missions causes.

Perceived competition also led to the action taken by directors of the Baptist Courier, who voted March 3 to ban all CBF advertising from the state paper while a committee studies the matter. Fred Stone, pastor of First Baptist Church in Pickens, S.C, chairs the study committee. He said the board's actions were in response to increased CBF promotional activities in South Carolina. The state CBF organization had promoted a "Parade of Preaching" event in the Baptist Courier earlier in the year, he said, and several South Carolina Baptist churches hosted a series of CBF informational gatherings just prior to the board meeting.

Stone said board members asked themselves, "Will we as the Baptist Courier be involved in promoting CBF activities?" Board members instructed editor Don Kirkland to reject all state or national level CBF advertisements, and to refrain from printing any news item about CBF that could be considered promotional.

Stone confirmed that his committee has met to discuss whether the temporary policy should become permanent, but he declined to say what the committee will recommend at the board's next meeting, slated for Aug. 25.

Kirkland said the board has supported him in the past, and commended the board for acting responsibly "as they sought to walk the line between control and allowing editorial freedom."

The creation of specific restrictions on editorial content, however, has not been typical of state Baptist papers. While some papers operate primarily as the public-relations arms of their state conventions, most in the South and along the Atlantic Seaboard are quasi-independent. The papers are governed by elected boards that customarily entrust their editors with authority to make decisions regarding editorial content, news coverage and advertising.

Editorial freedom was endorsed by the Association of State Baptist Papers, a national organization of editors, in a "Statement of Principles" adopted in January 2000. The document states that members "believe the free flow of truthful information is vital to the health and well-being of Baptist individuals, congregations, associations and state and national conventions." It adds: "We pledge to uphold the inviolability of the free flow of truth. Our professional and spiritual credibility rises or falls on our ability to do so. ... We empower Baptists when we provide truthful information upon which they can make their individual and collective decisions."

Some individual papers guarantee editorial freedom through written policies. For example, Virginia's Religious Herald includes the statement "Trustees of the paper ensure unrestricted editorial freedom" in the masthead of each issue. Policies of the Kentucky Western Recorder state that, "The daily and weekly decisions regarding the preparation and presentation of editorials, news, features, photographs, topics and other content are the responsibility of the editor and the staff. Those decisions shall be made in a climate of responsible freedom and shall not be subject to prior restriction, authorization, or censorship."

Documents incorporating the Biblical Recorder as an agency of North Carolina's Baptist State Convention call for it "to maintain and safeguard the inalienable rights and privileges of a free press, these rights and privileges being consistent with the traditional Baptist emphasis upon the freedom, under Christ, of both the human spirit and Baptist churches."

Michael Chute, editor of the Florida Baptist Witness, said in an interview that the role of a state paper editor is not to be a censor, but to choose news items and accept advertisements that are most appropriate to the needs and interests of Baptists in each state. Chute, a former missionary with the International Mission Board, has a Ph.D. in mass communications and teaches college-level journalism. Chute stressed the importance of knowing one's audience and providing information of interest to the audience. "We make journalistic decisions," he said, "not political decisions."

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## **Jubilee 2000 debt relief supporters win increased funding, still falls short**

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- An effort to cancel debts owed by the world's poorest countries took a key step forward July 13 as the House of Representatives narrowly approved funding more than three times what House leadership had planned to provide.

The 216-211 vote raised from \$69 million to \$225 million the amount of 2001 U.S. funding for the international initiative known by its religious supporters as Jubilee 2000.

Twenty-six Republicans joined 190 Democrats in approving the increase following heated criticism from debt-relief supporters, who charged that the original \$69 million figure was too low and immoral.

The vote came on an amendment to a broader foreign-appropriations measure.

Even with the increase, the \$225 million represents only a portion of the \$435 million pledged by President Clinton in a meeting with leaders of other industrial nations.

Still, debt-relief supporters called the House vote a major victory. The vote came after religious leaders and lawmakers held a press conference outside the Capitol building criticizing GOP leaders for providing only a minimal amount of funding for the international relief plan.

"Nothing that this Congress will do this year is crueller than this refusal to fund debt relief," said Rep. Barney Frank, D-Mass. "We are talking literally about the deaths of children, adults, older people -- we're talking about starvation, disease," he said.

Debt-relief supporters say some African countries spend more for interest payments than health care or education.

"We are enjoined by religious leaders of every persuasion to proclaim Jubilee -- forgive the debt of the poorest people of the world," said Rep. John LaFalce, D-N.Y.

Religious leaders calling for debt relief include Baptist evangelist Billy Graham, Christian Coalition founder Pat Robertson, South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Pope John Paul II, LaFalce said.

However, 194 Republicans and 17 Democrats, opposed the funding increase.

"Let us not fool ourselves," Rep. Sonny Callahan, R-Ala., said on the House floor. "None of us would do this in our personal businesses, in our family lives, or in any other scenario that exists in the world. Nowhere should we allow these irresponsible and sometimes corrupt leaders the ability to borrow new monies simply because the United States of America and other countries are generous in their concern that people need to be helped."

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## **'Charitable choice' amendment fails in Senate tax legislation**

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A rider to a Senate tax bill that would have made it easier for religious organizations to receive federal money for providing social services fell three votes short of passage.

The failed amendment to a bill aimed at phasing out estate and gift taxes is the latest of several recent attempts by lawmakers to tack on so-called "charitable choice" measures to legislative initiatives.

Sponsored by Sen. Rick Santorum, R-Pa., the amendment would have provided aid to low-income communities, including a broad provision to fund the religious ministries of houses of worship.

While a majority of senators approved the amendment, it failed to gain a required three-fifths majority by three votes, 57-40.

Charitable-choice measures have been added to several bills in Congress in recent years, most notably the 1996 welfare-reform laws.

Supporters of charitable choice -- which include both leading presidential candidates -- say faith-based programs are more effective than others in areas such as drug treatment, juvenile mentoring and welfare

services. But opponents say giving tax dollars to sectarian groups violates the separation of church and state and opens the door for government regulation of houses of worship.

The failed Santorum amendment is similar to a proposal agreed to by President Clinton and House Republican leadership about a month ago. Formerly known as the American Community Renewal Act, it would allow the transfer of tax funds directly to houses of worship for religious social-service programs.

During debate over the Santorum amendment, Sen. Spencer Abraham, R-Mich., said that religious-based organizations should "be able to compete on equal grounds with non-religious organizations" without compromising their religious mission.

But Sen. Charles Robb, D-Va., said faith-based groups should not receive federal money as long as they are allowed to discriminate in hiring practices. "This chamber has fought for the last 40 years to eliminate discrimination," he said. "I simply cannot support legislation that turns back that clock."

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