

August 15, 2000

(00-72)

IN THIS ISSUE:

- Clinton discusses faith in forum with pastors
- More churches leave SBC over theological disputes
- Baptist church polity ready for prime time?
- Amsterdam declaration upholds gospel as the only way to salvation

**Clinton discusses faith
in forum with pastors**

By Bob Allen

SOUTH BARRINGTON, Ill. (ABP) -- More pastors should try to help politicians, President Bill Clinton said Aug. 10 in a far-ranging open forum with one of his own spiritual advisers, mega-church pastor Bill Hybels.

Speaking an hour and 15 minutes at a ministers' leadership conference at Hybels' Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Ill., Clinton talked openly about his faith, including lessons learned from the Monica Lewinsky sex scandal that nearly cost him his presidency.

Asked by Hybels to describe the current condition of his spiritual life, Clinton said: "Well, I feel much more at peace than I used to. And I think that as awful as what I went through was -- humiliating as it was, more to others than to me, even -- sometimes when you think you've got something behind you and then it's not behind you, this sort of purging process, if it doesn't destroy you, can bring you to a different place."

Clinton said he is "in the second year of a process of trying to totally rebuild my life from a terrible mistake I made."

"And I now see -- I don't think anybody can say, 'Hey, hey, the state of my spiritual life is great, it's constant and it's never going to change.' I think I learned enough now to know that's not true; that it's always a work in progress and you have to hope you're getting better every day. But if you're not getting better, chances are you're getting worse. That this has to be a dynamic, ongoing effort."

Clinton said he also "learned a lot about forgiveness" in his personal ordeal. "I've always thought I was sort of a forgiving, generous person, you know, non-judgmental in a negative sense -- not that I don't have opinions. But I realized once you've actually had to stand up and ask for forgiveness before the whole wide world, it makes it a little harder to be as hard as I think I once was on other people. And that's meant something to me, too. I think I've learned something about that."

Clinton's comments came just days before the Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles. It also coincided with an ongoing discussion about the role of faith in politics sparked by Democratic presidential candidate Al Gore's selection of Sen. Joe Lieberman as the first Jewish running mate in history.

Both Gore and Clinton are Southern Baptists. Republican candidate George W. Bush is also a born-again Christian and a Methodist.

Clinton told the pastors' gathering that he became a Christian in 1955, when he was 9 years old and attended Park Place Baptist Church in Hot Springs, Ark. While he hasn't seen Pastor James Fitzgerald in 45 years, Clinton said he remembers the way his childhood pastor looked, talked and "touched my heart."

"He convinced me that I needed to acknowledge that I was a sinner and that I needed to accept Jesus in my heart, and I did," Clinton said.

Another milestone came when Clinton was 12, when in the midst of a school-desegregation crisis, Billy Graham refused a request that he speak to a segregated audience in a crusade he was planning in Little Rock.

"He said if they insisted on that, he would not come," Clinton recalled, "that we were all children of God and he wanted to lead everybody to Christ."

The stand "really touched me," Clinton said, because his grandparents were among the few white people he knew who supported integration. "And all of a sudden, to have Billy Graham validating this based on his Christian witness had a profound impact on me. And it got me thinking at that early age about the relationship between your faith and your work, which, of course, has been one of the most hotly debated issues in Christianity for 2,000 years now -- what does the Book of James really mean, and all that."

When Graham returned to Arkansas to conduct another crusade 30 years later, Clinton said he took the evangelist to see Clinton's pastor and Graham's friend, who at the time was dying of cancer. They "relived" the earlier event, Clinton said. "And I've never forgotten it. And I never will. It's just like it happened yesterday to me. Even now, I can hardly talk about it."

Asked how he would respond to those who believe his frequent church attendance is "just an act," Clinton replied, "Well, at least it's a consistent act."

While he went to church regularly through high school, he said, like many others, he became more sporadic in church attendance once he entered college.

After his election as governor of Arkansas in 1979, his church in Little Rock, Immanuel Baptist Church, held a dedication service in his honor. "And Hillary said to me: 'You know, we should start going to church again on a regular basis. We ought to do it. And you should join the choir. It would do you good to think about something besides politics.'"

While Clinton's schedule as governor prevented him from attending choir rehearsals, he had a strong music background and was able to sight read, so the director allowed him to join the church choir. From 1980 until the year he became president, Clinton said, "I got to sing in the church choir every Sunday, and it meant a lot to me."

When the family moved to Washington, Clinton said, they wanted to attend church together. Hillary Clinton is a Methodist, and they chose Foundry United Methodist Church and have attended "pretty regularly" for seven and a half years.

"So I've been doing this for a long time," Clinton said. "I don't do it for anybody else. I do it for me. It helps me to go. ... I'm sitting there in church, just like everyone else -- except maybe needing it more -- and it's one of the best hours of the week for me. I just let everything else go, take my Bible, read, listen, sing. I don't know, why does anybody go? It means something to me. It's a way of not only validating my faith, but deepening it and basically replenishing it."

Clinton said more pastors should seek opportunities to minister to politicians, even if they don't share their policies or party affiliation.

"First of all, because we need it," Clinton said. Leaders are forced to make decisions that affect other people's lives, often under circumstances that "are unimaginably difficult, either because you're under political or personal duress."

Also, he added, "If you're not careful, when you have this kind of job, it can overtake you. You can believe it's even more important than it is. You can let it take up even more time than it should. And it can crowd out all that other stuff inside that keeps you centered and growing and whole."

"It's very important that everybody in public life has somebody talking to them who ... has no interest in either playing up to them and telling them what they want to hear, no interest in getting something from them, and no interest in attacking them."

"And a pastor can do that," Clinton said.

Clinton said he has been helped by his sessions with Hybels and ministers Gordon McDonald, Tony Campolo and Phil Wogaman. "It sort of takes me out of all the stuff that's going on and forces me to look at it in a different way, and to look at my own life in a different way, and it really kind of keeps me anchored. And you can -- all of you -- can do that for somebody else."

Clinton said churches also have a larger role to play in public life. "I think basically America works best when it's really strong at the grass roots," he said. "And that means that the role of community churches is pivotal."

And he said of Hybels what he has also said about Vice President Al Gore. "I used to say, when I was being criticized, he doesn't get enough credit for what we did together that is good, and surely, no fair-minded person would blame him for any mistake that I made."

"I hope you'll feel that way about Hybels," he said. ... "He didn't fail in his ministry because I did. And what he did was good for America, because I needed somebody to talk to -- to brace me up and make me think about things in another way. It was a gift. It's something I'll treasure all my life.

"And for those of you who have whatever political or personal differences you have, I hope you will still believe that he did the right thing. Because he did."

-30-

-- Information for this story was obtained from a transcript of Clinton's remarks that was obtained from the White House Web site, www.whitehouse.gov

More churches leave SBC over theological disputes

HIGH POINT, N.C. (ABP) -- The 1,000-member First Baptist Church of High Point, N.C., has joined the ranks of churches to leave the Southern Baptist Convention over doctrinal differences.

The historic church voted Aug. 9 to amend its constitution to end ties to the nation's largest Protestant denomination. "Our church is older than the Southern Baptist Convention, and the results of the vote tonight show that we are just maintaining long-held Baptist principles this church has always been committed to," Pastor Bill Slater told the Greensboro News and Record.

Slater said a key issue in the vote were recent changes to the SBC's "Baptist Faith and Message" statement that church members view as encroaching on the autonomy of the local church. "It's clearly authoritarianism in that the SBC is saying from the top down, 'Here's what we, true Baptists, believe, and if you don't agree, you're not a real Baptist,'" he said.

The 176-year-old First Baptist Church of Columbia, Mo., took similar action July 30, ending ties with the SBC while remaining part of American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A., the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and the Alliance of Baptists.

"While we have not dramatically changed our direction in the past 20 years, the SBC has," according to a denominational-review committee recommendation approved by the church. The denomination "no longer reflect(s) our understanding of Baptist heritage, polity, doctrine and missions."

In recent years, the document says, the congregation "has found itself increasingly uncomfortable with being identified as a Southern Baptist church."

The congregation, which has been aligned with the SBC in some way since the convention's founding in 1845, will also stay with the Missouri Baptist Convention and the Little Bonne Femme Baptist Association "for now." The recommendation noted the committee is concerned that the state convention "may fall victim to the organized SBC fundamentalist-conservative movement in Missouri."

As with previous congregations that have issued public statements about leaving the denomination, both churches cited issues dating back several years. No one knows how many moderate and liberal churches have left the SBC in protest of its conservative leadership, but similar trickles occurred after the convention passed a statement on wifely submission two years ago, and on the Disney boycott and evangelization of Jews before that.

Also severing ties with the SBC this summer was Broadus Memorial Baptist Church in Charlottesville, Va. The congregation voted to leave the SBC June 11, saying it no longer supports the denomination's goals and practices.

-30-

-- By ABP staff

Baptist church polity ready for prime time?

RALEIGH, N.C. (ABP) -- Feel like the world is passing you by because the CBS hit show "Survivor" conflicts with your church's prayer meeting on Wednesday night? Don't fret, Southern Baptist, suggests a recent letter to the editor in a Baptist state newspaper.

What's all the excitement about "Survivor?" asked a letter in the Aug. 12 issue of North Carolina's Biblical Recorder.

"A bunch of folk living on nothing in an out-of-the-way place with a weekly chance that they will be voted off the island?" asked letter writer Ron Boswell of Reidsville, N.C.

"Why, Baptist preachers have been doing this for years."

While the perils of local-church governance may help pastors identify with the ensemble of castaways that can only be described as part "Gilligan's Island" and part "Lord of the Flies," there are fewer parallels with another hit show.

With a recent study finding the average salary of a full-time pastor under \$40,000, few of the Southern Baptist Convention's career preachers, it would seem, "want to be a millionaire."

-30-

-- By Bob Allen

Amsterdam declaration upholds gospel as the only way to salvation

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (ABP) -- Some 10,000 evangelists meeting July 29-Aug. 6 in The Netherlands adopted a declaration affirming the mandate to make Christ known around the world.

The 5,000-word "Amsterdam Declaration: A Charter for Evangelism in the 21st Century" says that while there "may well be traces of truth, beauty and goodness in many non-Christian belief systems ... we have no warrant for regarding any of these as alternative gospels or separate roads to salvation."

"The only way to know God in peace, love and joy is through the reconciling death of Jesus Christ the risen Lord," reads an article on "Religious Pluralism and Evangelism." It also calls for sharing the gospel with courtesy and respect while advocating "religious liberty and human rights for all."

"As we enter into dialogue with adherents of other religions, we must be courteous and kind," the statement says. "But such dialogue must not be a substitute for proclamation."

The declaration also challenges Western postmodernism's "relativistic denial that there is any global and absolute truth."

"We pledge ourselves to present and proclaim the biblical gospel and its Christ, always and everywhere, as fully sufficient and effective for the salvation of believers," the statement says. "Therefore, we oppose all skeptical and relativizing or syncretizing trends, whether rationalist or irrationalist, that treat the gospel as not fully true, and so as unable to lead believers into the new divine life that it promises them. We oppose all oppressive and destructive uses of God's wonderful truth."

A glossary section defines the Bible as "the written Word of God" and describes Scripture as "totally true and trustworthy, and the only infallible rule of faith and practice."

A Southern Baptist, Timothy George, dean of Samford University's Beeson Divinity School in Birmingham, Ala., led the writing and editing of the document, the work of three special task groups.

Other issues addressed in the document include social responsibility and evangelism. "We pledge ourselves to follow the way of justice in our family and social life, and to keep personal, social and environmental values in view as we evangelize."

Sponsored by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, the Amsterdam conference drew evangelists from 209 countries and territories, three-fourths of them from developing nations. The stated purpose of the conference was to prepare participants to use new and more effective ways to present the gospel.

The full text of the Amsterdam Declaration is found on the Internet at <http://media.amsterdam2000.org/declaration.asp>

-30-

-- By Bob Allen

END
