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**Florida Baptists embrace changes
to 'Baptist Faith and Message'**

By Bob Allen

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. (ABP) -- Florida Baptists declared solidarity with the Southern Baptist Convention, overwhelmingly updating their constitution and bylaws to reflect changes this summer to the SBC's "Baptist Faith and Message" confessional statement.

However, messengers to the Nov. 13-14 Florida Baptist State Convention in Daytona Beach opted against making the revised statement a litmus test for leadership.

About 1,500 messengers approved bylaw changes updating references to the state convention's official faith statement from the 1963 "Baptist Faith and Message" to the document "as revised in the year 2000."

Florida churches that disagree with the revisions, however, can remain in good standing with the state convention. Language on membership adopted in 1994 requires adherence either to the "Baptist Faith and Message" or "any other declaration of faith which parallels the tenets of our historic Baptist faith."

Lakeland pastor Jay Dennis, newly elected president of the Florida convention, told reporters that reference would include the 1963 version of the "Baptist Faith and Message," as well as an earlier 1925 version and even the 1833 "New Hampshire Baptist Confession," which predates the Southern Baptist Convention.

Dennis said the membership requirement was not intended to exclude anyone but to affirm support for the Southern Baptist Convention.

Some Baptists have criticized changes in the "Baptist Faith and Message" that narrowed views on the ordination of women and how the Bible is interpreted. Critics have also said the faith statement, which was before viewed as a voluntary consensus of beliefs, has taken on the force of a creed, which Baptists, with their congregational polity, have traditionally abhorred.

Most notably, the Baptist General Convention of Texas cited the new faith statement as a primary reason for reducing their support of SBC seminaries and other ministries by more than \$5 million.

Other state conventions -- including Mississippi, Arkansas, New Mexico and North Carolina -- have also shied away from more conservative language in the new revisions.

Dennis told reporters that in today's climate, for Florida Baptists not to update their governing documents would be perceived as opposing the SBC. "Florida Baptists are very supportive of the Southern Baptist Convention," he said.

John Sullivan, executive director of the state convention, told messengers he doesn't agree with every word in the "Baptist Faith and Message" but supports it in principle.

"This is not an infallible document," Sullivan said. "I do believe most Florida Baptists believe most of the 2000 'Baptist Faith and Message.'"

Sullivan, a former pastor, said the convention needs tight theological parameters to keep extreme viewpoints, such as affirmation of homosexuality, from gaining influence among the state's Baptists.

Messengers did not support, however, a recommended bylaw that would have made affirmation of "all the principles set forth" in the newest "Baptist Faith and Message" a qualification for any person nominated to a convention board of trustees.

Ed Johnson, president of Florida Baptists' state mission board, told messengers the convention recognizes that associations and churches that cooperate with the state convention have a right to determine their own set of beliefs. "The state convention also is autonomous, and you have the right to determine parameters for cooperation," he said in recommending the bylaw.

Instead, messengers approved an amendment tacking on the "any other declaration of faith which parallels the tenets of our historic Baptist faith" language onto the criteria for trustee nomination as well.

Craig Sherouse, pastor of Lakeside Baptist Church in Lakeland, said he offered the amendment to make the bylaws consistent and to allow "the wider spectrum of Florida Baptists to continue the same level of involvement we have had."

No one spoke against Sherouse's amendment, and it passed overwhelmingly.

Sullivan said that each year, between 250 and 300 persons are recommended for nomination to about 75 posts on trustee boards and other leadership committees. Other qualifications for those leaders are evidence of a personal relationship with Christ, at least one year's membership and current good standing with a cooperating church and tithing, the donation of 10 percent of one's income to their church.

In other business, Florida Baptists approved a basic Cooperative Program budget of \$32.4 million. It earmarks 40 percent for the SBC and the rest for Florida Baptist Convention causes (51.75 percent), pastoral aid (5 percent) and a church-annuity program (3.25 percent) that is funded jointly by the state and national conventions.

Florida Baptists elected Dennis, pastor of Lakeland's First Baptist Church at the Mall, as their new president. He was unopposed for the volunteer position.

Dennis, 41, a native of Fort Smith, Ark., moved to Florida from a pastorate in Texas just less than five years ago. He quickly gained a high profile in the state convention, however, serving as president of the pastor's conference, preaching the convention sermon in 1998 and sitting two years on the state mission board, including last year as vice president.

His church, a congregation founded in 1895, recently bought and relocated to a vacant 400,000 square-foot shopping mall, which it is in the process of remodeling, raising money and paying as it goes.

The congregation "has literally exploded with growth" since the move, Dennis said. It now numbers 4,500 members, averages a weekly worship attendance of 2,200 and is transitioning into "mega-church" status, he said.

Dennis said that as president of Florida Baptists he hopes to encourage church growth, particularly among plateaued churches, and to emphasize prayer as a growth strategy. He recently wrote a book published by Zondervan titled "The Prayer Experiment," which describes his experience in Lakeland.

Dennis described himself as "conservative theologically." While generally supportive of the conservative leadership of the SBC, "I have not allowed myself to get bogged down in political issues," he said.

Asked about including churches that support the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in Florida Baptist life, however, he said the moderate group has pulled away from the mainstream of Southern and Florida Baptists over issues of theology and leadership style.

"I don't want to see the words 'evangelism and missions' become smokescreen words," Dennis said.

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Colorado Baptists approve new 'Baptist Faith and Message'

By ABP staff

FORT COLLINS, Colo. (ABP) -- Colorado's Southern Baptists debated but approved making the latest version of the "Baptist Faith and Message" their official statement of beliefs.

The Colorado Baptist General Convention's constitution previously required churches seeking affiliation with the state group to have adopted and adhere to the "Baptist Faith and Message" as adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention in 1963.

This summer, however, Southern Baptists revised the faith statement, adding language that many have complained is too conservative.

In response to a recommendation to update the Colorado Baptist constitution to base membership on agreement with the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message," an amendment from the floor proposed requiring churches seeking membership to "adopt any of the 'Baptist Faith and Message'" statements in Southern Baptist history.

Messengers at the Oct. 24-25 meeting in Fort Collins spoke both for and against the proposed amendment before voting it down 91-56.

"The (2000) Baptist Faith and Message, which takes a firm stand for the family, is a lone voice," said Butch Caner, senior pastor of Central Baptist Church, Aurora. "We shouldn't sacrifice truth for a pseudo-peace."

"The 'Baptist Faith and Message' interprets what we believe about the Bible and is not the Bible itself," replied Jay Humphreys, director of missions of the Continental Divide Baptist Association. "We don't want to fight over what has been interpreted, but what God has given. I believe any of the 'Baptist Faith and Message' statements sufficiently describes what we believe without clinging to any one. We agree with all of them because we believe in the Bible."

After defeating the amendment, messengers approved the constitutional change by a show of ballots.

More than 250 messengers attended the 45th annual meeting of the Colorado convention. Among business items, they approved a budget of more than \$4.3 million for 2001.

Messengers also approved a resolution supporting the Southern Baptist Convention and its boards, agencies, seminaries, committees, commissions and the Cooperative Program unified budget.

In other business, Rick Lewis was elected to serve a second consecutive term as president. Also elected to serve a second consecutive term was Jim Sheets, pastor of Mount Tabor Baptist Church, Byers, as first vice-president, and Tobey Williams, pastor of Bicentennial Baptist Church, Fruita, as second vice-president.

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-- Adapted from a longer story by Allen Spencer, editor of the Rocky Mountain Baptist

Georgia Baptists endorse 'Baptist Faith and Message'

By Greg Warner

SAVANNAH, Ga. (ABP) -- Georgia Baptists overwhelmingly endorsed the Southern Baptist Convention's new confession of faith Nov. 14 despite expressed fears that it might exclude those who disagree with its conservative doctrine.

On a show-of-hands vote, the 3,447 messengers to the Georgia Baptist Convention meeting in Savannah overwhelmingly approved a resolution of "official approval and appreciation" for recent changes in the statement of Baptist beliefs.

The resolution has no binding effect on the convention's 3,500 churches. But opponents said it might be used to enforce doctrinal conformity in the churches and exclude moderates from serving as convention employees, trustees and appointees.

In introducing the resolution, proposed by the convention's Executive Committee, Mike Minnix, pastor of First Baptist Church in Lilburn, said the "Baptist Faith and Message" is not a creed but a "consensus of opinion" about what Southern Baptists believe. The document affirms local-church autonomy and states that it holds "no authority over conscience," Minnix said. "If it were not so, I would not stand here."

Gene Wilder of First Baptist Church of Fitzgerald opposed the resolution, because it deletes language from the 1963 version that affirms Jesus Christ as the criterion for interpreting Scripture. "We can interpret the Scripture through the life and teachings of Jesus Christ or through the opinion of some less-than-perfect woman or man," he said. "If Jesus Christ is not the criterion for biblical interpretation, then who is?"

But Frank Page, an Executive Committee member, countered that the 2000 statement does not place the Bible over Jesus, and that attempts to paint the statement as denigrating Jesus are unfounded. "That dog ain't gonna hunt," said Page, pastor of Warren Baptist Church in Augusta.

While the new statement, like any other, could be used as a creed, he said, it would require "some tremendous interpretive gymnastics" to do so. "It is time to stop the smokescreens.... Read it for yourself, and you will see it affirms Jesus Christ as Lord."

Ches Smith, retired pastor of First Baptist Church in Tifton, however, argued the 2000 statement has resulted in "the fragmentation of the people of God," rather than doctrinal integrity. "This statement divides us, it does not unite us. It plants confusion, not clarity.... It is a step backwards," he said.

Bill Harrell, pastor of Abilene Baptist Church near Augusta, said the new "Baptist Faith and Message" is necessary because the version adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention in 1963 provided a loophole "as big as a barn gate." Moderate Baptists, he charged, use the earlier version "to interpret Scripture any way they want to."

While Texas Baptists recently cited the 2000 statement as a reason to distance themselves from the SBC, Harrell said, "That's Texas; this is Georgia." He predicted the statement would "draw people to a better and better understanding of what Scripture is."

Georgia is one of several state conventions considering some kind of endorsement of the "Baptist Faith and Message," which was drafted by a special Southern Baptist Convention committee and approved by SBC messengers last June. The statement codifies many of the opinions advanced by conservative leaders in the national convention. Supporters of the Georgia action said that Baptists in the state ought to support the SBC's conservative direction, even if not everyone agrees on every specific of the faith statement.

Opponents complained that the statement reduces the role of Jesus in guiding biblical interpretation, excludes women from pastoral roles, teaches submission of wives to husbands, and too narrowly defines views of biblical inspiration.

Speaking to reporters after the vote, convention president William Ricketts, pastor of Prince Avenue Baptist Church in Athens, predicted convention employees would not be required to endorse the new faith statement. But he added, "I imagine it will have some effect" on the direction of Georgia Baptist life.

Ricketts said he does not expect to use the statement to screen his presidential appointments to leadership roles. "I'm looking for men and women who love Jesus and believe the Bible.... [But] I would not appoint anyone I felt was going to be negative. If I thought someone was going to be a problem in that regard, I would not appoint them."

He said he was pleased with the margin of support for the statement, which he and other leaders estimated to be about 2-to-1. "I would have hated to see us divided down the middle. ... We do support the Southern Baptist Convention."

Messengers adopted a \$47.3 million budget for 2001, which represents a \$2.7 million increase over 2000. A mission partnership with Baptists in France also was approved.

Government officials were on hand from North Korea to accept a \$500,000 relief grant from Georgia Baptists. Two grants of \$250,000 each are also expected from South Carolina Baptists and the SBC International Mission Board.

Messengers held a memorial service Tuesday night for three Baptist Life Flight workers killed in a July 24 helicopter accident. A college scholarship fund has been set up to benefit the children of flight nurse Renee Welch Chapman, flight paramedic Michael Elam and pilot Bart Bradshaw, all of Atlanta.

Messengers passed a resolution calling for national legislation outlawing so-called partial-birth abortion, which they termed "a particularly barbaric form of abortion and infanticide."

Another resolution asked Georgia lawmakers to prohibit the use of funds to teach sex-education classes that do not uphold Georgia laws that prohibit fornication.

Other resolutions opposed the use of raffles to raise money for public schools and called on the government and churches to work "more fervently" on behalf of the mentally challenged.

Ricketts was elected to a customary second term as convention president.

Four vice-presidents were elected: first vice president Mark Hearn, pastor of Calvary Temple, Savannah; second vice president Charles Cooper, pastor of Burkhalter Baptist Church, Savannah; third vice president Ethel Wynn, wife of Larry Wynn, pastor of Hebron Baptist Church, Dacula; and fourth vice president James Dorriety, an evangelist and retired Georgia pastor.

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Moderates gain ground in North Carolina

By ABP staff

WINSTON-SALEM, N.C. (ABP) -- Moderates in North Carolina ended a losing streak, winning several votes in a Baptist state convention meeting that has in recent years been dominated by conservatives.

For the first time in six years, moderate candidates won two of the state convention's three top elected offices. Buddy Corbin of Asheville defeated a conservative-backed candidate for first vice president, while Larry Harper of Raleigh won a contested race for second vice president.

President Mike Cummings, who was unopposed for a traditional second term, is a conservative but is well-liked by both sides.

The three officers work together to nominate a key committee in a process by which North Carolina Baptists elect leadership, including the state convention's general board. While conservatives have prevailed in officer elections in recent years, moderates still control the general board, which sets policy for the state convention.

In other business at the Nov. 13-14 convention meeting in Winston-Salem, North Carolina Baptists voted narrowly to retain fraternal ties with Wake Forest University by defeating an amended motion to end a 166-year relationship with the school.

The vote of 2,390 to 1,564, or 60.45 percent to 39.55 percent, failed to get the two-thirds majority needed to change the Baptist state convention constitution. The vote followed about 45 minutes of debate.

The general board had proposed changing the fraternal relationship to a "historical" relationship. The board's proposal would have removed Wake Forest from a council on Christian higher education but continued funding for scholarships.

But messengers amended the proposal to remove WFU completely from the constitution and end scholarship funding by 2004. The amendment, which needed only a simple majority, may have eroded support for the original motion, which needed a two-thirds majority since it would have changed the constitution.

The failure of the amended motion leaves the fraternal relationship intact for now.

North Carolina Baptists also passed a resolution reaffirming ties to the Southern Baptist Convention but only after adding amendments affirming the autonomy of the state convention.

And an effort from the floor to amend a nomination report by replacing a moderate nominee to the general board with a conservative failed with an estimated 90 percent of messengers voting "No."

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-- Compiled from reporting by the Biblical Recorder

Texas church announces separation from SBC

By Marv Knox

WACO, Texas (ABP) -- A historic Texas Baptist congregation, Seventh and James Baptist Church in Waco, has voted to "declare that we are not related to the Southern Baptist Convention."

The vote, approved 105-2 during a recent church conference, actually was "positive in nature," Pastor Raymond Bailey said. The church expressed its strong identification with four other Baptist groups -- Waco Baptist Association, the Baptist General Convention of Texas, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and the Baptist World Alliance.

"It really was lay-motivated," Bailey said of the initiative. "The SBC had become a source of embarrassment, which consequently had a negative impact on our evangelistic and missions efforts."

Bailey said recent SBC actions prompting the action included the "targeting" of minority groups for evangelism, changes to the "Baptist Faith and Message" calling for wives to submit to their husbands and limiting pastoral roles to men and a "systematic exclusion" of moderates in convention leadership.

The church, which is located adjacent to Baylor University, stopped funding the SBC about 10 years ago through its main budget. Bailey said the church would continue to honor members' requests to designate their contributions to SBC missions projects.

Seventh and James has associated with the moderate Cooperative Baptist Fellowship since it was formed, largely in protest against the conservative drift of the SBC, in 1991.

The church finally decided to state specifically its denominational affiliations, explained Naymond Keithly, chairman of the worship council and a religion professor at Baylor. "We thought that we were really just setting the record straight," he told the Waco Tribune-Herald. "We haven't been giving money for almost 10 years, so why not just make a formal statement that's not who we are?"

Seventh and James considered its action for about six months before the Oct. 18 vote, Bailey said. He said the vote was unrelated to recent actions by the Baptist General Convention of Texas that reduced funding to the six SBC seminaries and two other SBC agencies.

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Coming 'culture quake' calls for compassion, not fear, ethicist says

By Greg Warner

SAVANNAH, Ga. (ABP) -- Baptists should not fear the "culture quake" that is rearranging the modern world but should respond with Jesus-like compassion, said ethicist Robert Parham.

Parham, founder and executive director of the Baptist Center for Ethics, based in Nashville, Tenn., was one of three preachers at the fall convocation of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Georgia, held in Savannah Nov. 12-13, just prior to the Georgia Baptist Convention meeting.

Parham described the "culture quake" as the shift from modernism to postmodernism. While the modern worldview was about head-knowledge, skepticism and scientific certainty, the postmodern world is about heart-knowledge, the supernatural and spirituality, he explained.

Modernism has so shaped contemporary Christian faith, he said, that many Christians are fearful of the coming changes.

"Within Southern Baptist life, many believe faith is cerebral assent. Faith is a creedal statement. Faith is saying the right words the right way to the right group. These Baptists view the culture quake with near panic. They see postmodernism as the replacement for communism and liberalism -- something else to fear and hate."

Their response to postmodernism, Parham said, is to "tighten up doctrine" and retreat into "a 19th century cultural castle of conformity," hurling "dogma over the castle walls" at those outside -- an apparent reference to the new statement of faith adopted in June by the Southern Baptist Convention.

What is needed today, Parham said, are "Baptists like the tribe of Issacher," whom the Bible says "had an understanding of the times to know what Israel ought to do." (I Chronicles 12)

"In the midst of this culture quake, we need Baptists who can understand the times and know what to do" -- who are relational Christians, not confrontational ones, he said.

Understanding the times will prompt Christians to respond like Jesus did -- with compassion, he said. "When he saw a need, he did not meet it with a creed. He did not see a crowd and serve up dogma."

"In the postmodern world, people are going to be moved more by who we are than what we say we believe. In the postmodern world, people will be moved more by meeting needs than reading creeds."

About 500 people attended the two-day Georgia CBF meeting, held at the historic First Baptist Church of Savannah, which recently withdrew from the Southern Baptist Convention. The meeting also included mission testimonies from Liberia and China and a Jewish-Baptist dialogue.

In her message, Karen Massey, an assistant professor at Mercer University's McAfee School of Theology in Atlanta, used the parable of the weeds in Matthew 13 to teach about "the untidiness of the Kingdom of God"

In the parable, workers who found weeds growing in a wheat field "were prepared to tidy up the field" by uprooting the weeds, Massey said. But the owner of the field decided to let the weeds grow alongside the wheat until the harvest, in order to avoid damaging the wheat.

While Christians often want to "tidy up" the Kingdom by rooting out those influences they don't think belong, God is content to let good and bad influences exist side by side, Massey said, because "growth is more important than perfection."

"The Kingdom of God as we know it ... is not precise, not uniform, not pure," she said. Those modern-day Christians who want to "purge" the Kingdom of such "weeds" as local-church autonomy and priesthood of the believer are "making judgments we are not called to make," she said.

"The Kingdom is more about healing than doctrinal purity," she said. "We are not justified before God by our tidiness."

Longtime Baptist professor Glenn Hinson, who also spoke, said the world needs "horizontal people" -- those "who can see what God has in mind for human beings long before other people can see it."

In Romans 12:1-2, the Apostle Paul urges Christians to be "transformed by the renewal of your minds," said Hinson, who taught history and spirituality at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond. He is now a visiting professor at Emory University's Candler School of Theology in Atlanta.

Transformation, he said, means Christians should undergo "a recycling of their understanding" -- to see the world from a Kingdom point of view -- "not simply [be] shaped in the mold of the age in which we live." Such a perspective allows Christians to pay attention to others, act sensitively and work for justice, he said.

Too often, however, Baptists are so committed to a denominational "program" that "God couldn't get a word in edgewise," he said.

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