



Associated Baptist Press

Editor: Bob Allen
Executive editor: Greg Warner

Phone: 800.340.6626

Fax: 904.262.7745

E-mail: bob@abpnews.com

FEB 14 2001

SOUTHERN BAPTIST HISTORICAL
LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES
Nashville, Tennessee

(01-12)

February 6, 2001

IN THIS ISSUE:

- 'Mainstream' network mobilizes Baptists against 'fundamentalism'
- National 'Mainstream' network taking shape
- Texas Baptist leaders address 'Mainstream' group
- Joel Gregory affirms 'mainstream' position

'Mainstream' network mobilizes Baptists against 'fundamentalism'

By Bob Allen

DALLAS (ABP) -- After more than two decades of denominational infighting, the vast majority of Southern Baptists remain "largely uninformed" about causes of the conflict, said Houston layman John Baugh.

Of the 13 million "mainstream" Baptists he estimated are still on the sidelines of the Southern Baptist Convention controversy, Baugh said "it is unlikely that even 10 percent" are keenly aware of the dangers of "fundamentalism" facing their churches and the nation.

Mainstream Baptists, meanwhile, "are only four or five major decisions away from arresting the progress of and breaking the fundamentalist hold," Baugh said.

To do that, the movement must "enlist fellow Baptists in this ministry of freedom, and they are there to be enlisted," he said. To Baptists who say "I don't think we can do that," Baugh said, "Please don't say that, or just get out of the way."

Baugh spoke at a national consultation of the Network of Mainstream Baptists Feb. 5-6 in Dallas. Baugh, founder of the Sysco food company and longtime critic of fundamentalism, co-convened the meeting with Baylor University Chancellor Herbert Reynolds.

The network has been holding annual consultations for "three or four" years, said Reynolds. "These consultations have proven to be helpful to us and I think have helped our efforts throughout the states to preserve soul freedom," he said.

New Mainstream organizations formed last year in Alabama, Georgia, Illinois, Louisiana, North Carolina, Tennessee and Virginia, said David Currie, head of Texas Baptists Committed, the organization after which the Mainstream groups are modeled.

Those bring to 11 the number of Mainstream organizations working to mobilize Baptists in their states against what is termed alternately the "conservative resurgence" or "fundamentalist takeover" of the Southern Baptist Convention. Many Mainstream leaders are active in the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, an Atlanta-based alternative missions organization that avoids overt politicking.

Mainstream founders, however, believe they can appeal to churches the Fellowship can't reach.

Representing Virginia's new Mainstream group, Bill Wilson described a number of churches in his state that "know they aren't fundamentalist, don't know what they think about the CBF, and we believe are the vast majority."

"We believe there is a vast untapped potential among laypeople and pastors who don't feel comfortable in either group and have nowhere to go," he said.

The media and other observers of the prolonged struggle for control and direction of the SBC since the late 1970s typically describe competing factions as "moderates" and "conservatives." Baugh eschewed the use of those terms in describing a new grassroots movement aimed at halting the advance of fundamentalism through political processes in Baptist state conventions.

One term has been used to imply "that we are merely 'moderate' in our commitment to Christ and God's Holy Word," Baugh said. And while the term conservative "gains favorable impression" among those opposed to change, Baugh said, SBC fundamentalists weren't out to "conserve" anything. In fact, he charged, they are "revolutionaries" who have imposed a "new religion" on Southern Baptists.

"It is as erroneous to imply that mainstream Baptists are moderate about their beliefs as it is to describe fundamentalists as theologically conservative," Baugh said. He called on the denominational and secular press to "forego" the use of those terms in reporting about Baptist life.

"Mainstream" Baptists, Baugh said, "are the people who prayerfully determine and hold fast to our commitments. We adhere to the 1963 'Baptist Faith and Message.'"

They are the people who believe the decision about whom to ordain as ministers is "solely vested in each autonomous body of believers," he continued, and not in Southern Baptists' recently revised faith statement that says the Bible prohibits women from serving as senior pastors.

Mainstream Baptists are those who "sacrificially funded" the six Southern Baptist seminaries and other convention properties and who led the SBC to become the largest non-Catholic religious body and, at one time, the world's fastest growing faith group.

That ended in 1979, he said, when fundamentalists "systematically stole" all that mainstream Baptists had built. The group gained power, he alleged, through "a strategy based on devious means and Machiavellian machinations."

Baugh described actions of the new Southern Baptist leadership that he said indicate they have departed from the mainstream.

Baugh described as "startling" a change in the "Baptist Faith and Message" approved at last summer's SBC annual meeting that he said "significantly altered the role of Jesus in order to forward the new fundamentalist religion."

A second "astonishing" action at the same convention, Baugh said, was when a denominational leader spoke in opposition to a messenger's motion to seek peace among warring factions.

"The revolutionary fundamentalist religion is evolving before our eyes," Baugh said.

The forces that captured the SBC are now working to "transform other areas of Christendom" with a view toward gaining control of governmental bodies and then to impose their religious views on the American people, Baugh said.

"Some of the best-known fundamentalist leaders in control of the Southern Baptist Convention savor the day when the protective barrier separating church and state is gone," Baugh said. "Fundamentalists of all stripes savor victory and salivate over the potential of government power."

He urged mainstream Baptists to "stand in the halls of Congress" to dispute those who would erode the separation of church and state.

"We mainstreamers must engage them on every front," Baugh said. "I think we can and believe we will break this fundamentalist stranglehold on Baptist life."

While any conflict has two sides, Baugh said, "the actions of some fellow Baptists create a third side that inadvertently aids the cause of fundamentalism and impedes our efforts to arrest the growth of that movement."

Some non-fundamentalist Baptists "seemingly wish us to be mute in spite of all that has been seen and heard in 20 years," Baugh said. "Their demand is don't be unkind and don't be strident. Don't talk about the Baptist mess to anyone."

"Some of the very finest of our fellow Baptists have worked for reconciliation among our people," Baugh said. "I wish reconciliation were possible," but "our capitulation is the only response acceptable to fundamentalists."

Perry Sanders, pastor of First Baptist Church of Lafayette, La., urged churches to enlist their full quota of messengers for their state convention and to enlist others to do the same. "One victory is not enough," he said. "We've got to persevere 10 years at the minimum."

"We've got enough people if we simply have the perseverance to stay with it and not to falter and hold back."

"Neutrality is complicity with the opposition," Sanders said.

-30-

National 'Mainstream' network taking shape

By Bob Allen

DALLAS (ABP) -- Another Southern Baptist Convention splinter group opposed to its conservative/fundamentalist leadership is taking shape.

The Mainstream Baptists Network, a loose coalition of state groups modeled after the highly successful Texas Baptists Committed, has named co-chairmen to lead the year-old national network and is developing a mission statement and structure.

"We are turning a corner as a Mainstream or a Baptists Committed organization," said co-chairman Bill Wilson, pastor of First Baptist Church in Waynesboro, Va. "This is a new day. We are in effect closing down a chapter and starting a new chapter in what will be a pretty long story.

"By organizing and being a little more deliberate about our structure, we're sending a message about this organization we want to be sure is heard clearly across the country."

One part of that message, Wilson said, is in choosing a Virginian as co-chairman. Texas pastor Phil Lineberger is the other co-chairman. "This is not a Texas organization," Wilson said. "For the Mainstream organization to be successful, it must be a partnership from every part of this nation."

Texas Baptists Committed is credited with defending the Baptist General Convention of Texas against forces that moved the Southern Baptist Convention sharply to the right during the last two decades. Ten similar groups have started in other states, with mixed results.

Second, Wilson said, "This is not a movement or an organization that is either in competition or aligned with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship."

The Atlanta-based Fellowship is a 10-year-old organization supporting alternative missions, theological education and church-resource programs to Baptists disaffected by the SBC's leadership change.

"Some of us are ardent supporters of the CBF," Wilson said. "Others are not. That is not prerequisite for being involved or not being involved in this organization. Our intent is helping people be Baptist."

The network's main objectives for the coming year are to publish a national newsletter, grow its mailing list and add members. Nearly half of a \$207,000 budget for 2001 has been pledged.

Another message is that the group is not at present seeking to form a new Baptist convention, according to a draft of the network's plan of operation. However, leaders acknowledge no one knows what the future may hold.

David Currie, who heads Texas Baptists Committed and now assumes administration of the Network of Mainstream Baptists as a part-time consultant, told a Feb. 5-6 consultation of about 170 invited leaders he is confident that the voice of non-fundamentalist Baptists in America will prevail in the long run.

"The Network of Mainstream Baptists isn't even an organization," Currie said. "It is simply a network to say, 'Folks, fight fundamentalism where you are.'"

"We're not going to send any missionaries," Currie said. "We're not going to give any money to theological education. We're not any sort of a movement, per se. [We're saying], Go fight fundamentalists in your state. Don't let those beggars do in your state what they did in the Southern Baptist Convention."

-30-

Texas Baptist leaders address 'Mainstream' group

By Marv Knox

DALLAS (ABP) -- Free Baptists have a moral responsibility to preserve historic Baptist principles, state convention leader Charles Wade told an annual gathering of moderate Baptists from across the country.

"If we don't hold the Baptist vision up high, then Baptists in America and even worldwide will come under the domination of those who prefer control over freedom," cautioned Wade, who just completed his first year as executive director of the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

He addressed the Network of Mainstream Baptists' annual consultation, held Feb. 5-6 in Dallas. The network is an organization of autonomous Baptist groups created to prevent the spread of "politico-religious fundamentalism" in their states.

In addition, two other BGCT leaders -- convention President Clyde Glazener and Bob Campbell, chairman of its Seminary Study Committee -- addressed the group regarding issues in Texas.

"Under the fear of liberalism, Baptists have sacrificed their old friend, religious liberty," Wade said. "No one should ever come between the soul of a man or a woman and God.

"Freedom is tough to proclaim and difficult to protect, but it is worthy of our efforts."

Under that umbrella of freedom, Wade described six characteristics that "make Baptists 'Baptist'":

-- "Baptists are, before anything else, Christ's people," he said.

"You can't be a Baptist unless Jesus Christ reigns supreme in your soul." True Baptists "believe all the great doctrines of Jesus Christ," he said, noting they also are confident in the Christian gospel. "Everywhere it is heard, lives are redeemed."

-- "We also are a biblical people," he added. "We find the tenets for all we preach and say in Scripture. We believe it from beginning to end. We believe it is the inspired word of God -- true and trustworthy."

While he never would submit to sign any creed or "instrument of doctrinal accountability," Wade said, "I would sign every page of the Bible. We are a biblical, not a creedal, people. It is disappointing how many Baptists today don't understand that."

-- "We are church people," Wade affirmed. "Texas Baptists believe their local church can do anything God wants them to do. They love their churches. If I lived in your state, I'm sure I would feel the same way about Baptists in your state."

Churches also are strong because they are subject to their "head," Jesus Christ, he added, explaining that Baptists' congregational polity focuses on members' individual obedience to Christ, not individual self-will.

"When we vote, we don't ask our people to vote on their opinions, but to seek and vote the mind of Christ," he said.

-- "We are ethical people," he stressed. "We have this amazing sense that it is crucial to believe the Scripture. And the evidence that you believe is you behave the way you are supposed to believe."

-- "We are a mission people," Wade noted. "I believe everybody needs to be saved. Jesus didn't die for just one race, one people. And let me tell you, when the gospel gets heard, people are delivered -- they're saved."

-- "Baptists are a free people," he concluded. "We believe Christians are free, but there are always self-appointed authorities who want to take that freedom away. It is for freedom that Christ set us free."

That does not mean "Baptists can believe, think and behave any way they want to," he said. "Our freedom is in Christ. We are a Christian people. We have made a decision that his life, his goals, his purpose and his mission are ours. We have brought ourselves under his authority."

A chief reason Texas Baptists have remained free from religious domination has been Texas Baptists Committed, a political organization designed to support the BGCT and the prototype for other state "mainstream" organizations, said Glazener, pastor of Gambrell Street Baptist Church in Fort Worth.

"Were it not for this group, I'm not sure we would be free in Texas. In fact, I'm sure we would not," Glazener said. "Texas Baptists Committed is here to keep from happening in Texas what has happened in the Southern Baptist Convention," where so-called "conservatives" have gained control of all the agencies and institutions.

"Each vote that has been taken in [the BGCT] has been a vote for freedom," he said. "Most have been in reaction to SBC actions that impinge freedom. Texas has said, 'You can't do that to us.'"

Freedom-loving Baptists must "express a stewardship of our heritage," Glazener said. "We must pass that on, whatever the cost. The cost will be less than the cost of forfeiting freedom."

Heading up the BGCT's special Seminary Study Committee was "the hardest thing I've ever had to do as a Christian," said Campbell, pastor of Westbury Baptist Church in Houston. The committee's recommendations, which included significantly reducing the BGCT's funding of the six SBC seminaries and redirecting the money to support Texas Baptist ministry-training schools, were approved by messengers to the state convention's annual session last fall.

Although some critics have disparaged the committee's report, that document was thoroughly researched. "We would not put anything in the report without documenting it at least twice. I'm a biblical person. I believe you ought to have two witnesses."

Campbell recounted significant findings of the committee's study. He noted erosion of support for the doctrine of the priesthood of the believer, creedalism of the SBC, inappropriate involvement of seminary trustees in faculty selection, declining enrollment, high faculty turnover and a preponderance of faculty who do not have a Southern Baptist background.

He described a conversation with one seminary president, who asked why the Texans were bothered by the SBC's decision to remove Jesus as the criterion for judging Scripture, according to its new "Baptist Faith and Message" statement.

"I was stunned" by the question, Campbell recalled. "Any time you remove Jesus from anything, it is wrong."

Joel Gregory affirms 'mainstream' position

By Bob Allen

DALLAS (ABP) -- Those in the "mainstream" are in the "broad stream" of the Kingdom of God, former pastor Joel Gregory said Feb. 5 at a consultation of Mainstream Baptists in Dallas.

Gregory, former pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas, at one time supported the Southern Baptist Convention's fundamentalist leaders. He left the ministry in 1992 and now works in the publishing business.

"It did take me a good while to figure it out, but there are those for whom the Kingdom of God is nothing but pronouncing the 'shibboleth' in the right way," he said.

"Sometimes the Bible can become little more than a fetish," said Gregory, who was once regarded as one of Southern Baptists' premiere preachers and a rising star in denominational life. "We need to recognize and say clearly that we do not exalt the Bible by making it a fetish. We diminish the Bible by making it a fetish."

"Those who make it a shibboleth to be pronounced their way have contradicted the very purpose they espouse," Gregory said. "It is not in pronouncing a shibboleth correctly; it is in letting it be what it is."

Gregory contrasted the ministry of one man from his hometown of Fort Worth, Texas, with the pastor he followed once removed at Dallas First.

J. Frank Norris of First Baptist Church in Fort Worth built his life on "negativism, character assassination and tried to tear town what others were building," Gregory said.

Gregory said Norris used to send critical telegrams to Dallas pastor George W. Truett Sunday mornings in hopes they would distract his nemesis just before he stepped to his pulpit.

"Fifty years after Dr. Truett had gone on to glory, his name, his heart, his broad churchmanship, his reconciling spirit gave its name to an institution that bears his name," Gregory said, referring to the George W. Truett Theological Seminary at Baylor.

"Look at the aftermath of the other man," Gregory continued. "His church is all but gone. It meets in what is little more than a doublewide trailer. His school barely exists. His name is mentioned only as a foil to that against which he stood and continued to prosper after he was gone."

"Carved into the geography and biography of this part of North Texas is that the mainstream is the broad stream of the Kingdom of God," Gregory said.

Gregory quoted John Chrysostom, who said, "Perseverance is the queen of virtues."

"I think the tone that has been sounded today is one of perseverance and seeing the course through," Gregory said.

-30-

END
