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BGCT leaders denounce latest Baptist Press attack on Texas

DALLAS (ABP) -- Texas Baptists' top executive says he plans to write letters protesting the way the Baptist General Convention of Texas is portrayed in a recent article published by the Southern Baptist Convention's news service.

"We will not allow lies to go unchallenged," Executive Director Charles Wade told members of the state convention's Executive Board May 22.

Wade delivered an emotional rebuttal to an article in the previous day's Baptist Press. The story, written by a journalist with ties to a rival state Baptist convention in Texas, repeated many allegations of supposed liberalism that have been circulated in the past but labeled spurious by a special committee formed to respond to such charges.

Written by Tammi Ledbetter, whose husband is communications director for the Southern Baptists of Texas Convention, the BP story was based on a report in Citizen, a magazine published by James Dobson's Focus on the Family ministry.

The original magazine article was highly critical of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs. It drew heavily upon material provided by Missouri Baptist layman Roger Moran, who has been an ardent critic of the BJC, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and BGCT. Moran is a member of the SBC Executive Committee.

The BP writer went further by linking concerns about the BJC to the BGCT, because the Texas convention continues to support the religious-liberty agency that the SBC defunded several years ago.

The BP article also criticized an award-winning series of articles in the Baptist Standard on Moran that included comments critical of his research.

Moran is fond of digging up quotes from individuals supporting abortion, homosexuality or other controversial positions. He then finds instances where moderate Baptist leaders worked alongside those people on boards of various organizations. Critics of Moran describe the tactic as "guilt by association." Moran defends his method, saying that the type of organizations people choose to join says something about their beliefs.

The BGCT's Committee on Baptist Integrity has accused Moran of malicious and unwarranted attacks on other Christians. Nevertheless, Moran's literature is still being circulated widely across Texas in an effort to persuade churches to distance themselves from the moderate-led BGCT.

BGCT President Clyde Glazener told the Executive Board the BP article -- the latest in a string of negative articles about the BGCT -- illustrates that fundamentalists who oppose the state convention are the ones who are stirring up trouble.

"We have been trying to get out of this fight," he said. "We don't want to fight, but we will defend who we are."

Wade said he feels "a deep sense of outrage" about the way SBC leaders have used BP to "stir up accusations against us."

"I am going to write Southern Baptist leaders, as well as Dr. Dobson, and ask them to publicly disavow this kind of reporting," he said.

Phil Strickland, coordinator of the Christian ethics and public life section of the BGCT, defended the BJC against the attack by both Dobson's magazine and BP.

"The BJC has my firm and absolute support, mainly because I still believe in the separation of church and state," he said.

Strickland, Wade and Glazener all commended the Baptist Standard for its reporting and urged Texas Baptists to get their news from the Standard rather than BP.

In another impromptu response to the BP article, Bobby Broyles, pastor of First Baptist Church of Earth, Texas, said he is perplexed by charges that the BGCT is too liberal.

Noting that he has served on the BGCT Executive Board, strategy-planning committee and Christian Life Commission, he said: "There has never been one discussion in any meeting I've been in ... , never one hint that abortion is a moral option. There has never been any hint that homosexuality is a moral lifestyle. There has never been a hint that anyone doesn't believe in the authority of the Bible."

Will Hall, the SBC Executive Committee vice president in charge of Baptist Press, did not immediately respond to an e-mail requesting comment on the remarks by Texas leaders.

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-- By ABP staff. Adapted from a Baptist Standard story by Mark Wingfield.

Conservative, moderate groups in Kentucky plan strategy sessions

By Trennis Henderson

RUSSELLVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- It's six months away, but conservative and moderate leaders are already gearing up for a showdown at this year's Kentucky Baptist Convention.

The conservative Kentucky Baptist Laymen's Network is holding regional meetings across the state, including a recent informational meeting at Green Ridge Baptist Church near Russellville.

Mainstream Baptists of Kentucky, a moderate group that formed earlier this year, has announced plans to host a series of meetings in late May and early June.

The laymen's network, led by Louisville layman John Michael, endorsed a slate of conservative candidates for KBC office last year. All three candidates supported by the network fell short in their bids for convention office.

Messengers to last year's KBC annual meeting also took issue with members of the network distributing campaign-related newsletters outside the convention facility. Messengers approved a motion barring on-site distribution of campaign material at future KBC meetings.

Michael, president of the laymen's network, has sent mixed signals about whether he plans to honor the convention action. He initially said he would abide by the motion. Since then, however, he has adopted a "wait and see" attitude, noting that he doesn't "feel technically or procedurally bound" by the messengers' action.

Promotional material for the May 8 meeting at Green Ridge Church stated that the laymen's network is designed to "help defend our convention from outside influences which would tend to undermine our work and witness for Christ."

"When people are informed with the truth," the material added, "they can do what is necessary to keep liberal, unbiblical influence from our Kentucky Baptist Convention."

Host Pastor Robert Tarrence said the laymen's network affirms the inerrancy of Scripture and the 2000 version of the "Baptist Faith and Message." He said the group opposes such issues as homosexuality and women serving as senior pastors.

"I want to hold onto the state of Kentucky," Tarrence told the group. "If the moderates get their way, they will turn this state convention into something I can't support."

Herb Booth, chairman of the moderate Mainstream Baptists group, said his organization's goal is to encourage enough like-minded messengers to attend the KBC annual meeting Nov. 13-14 and influence the outcome of the presidential election.

The series of Mainstream Baptists meetings will begin May 29 in Erlanger. Leaders will discuss how individuals can be involved in the group and how they plan to prepare for the KBC annual meeting.

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Family continues to move away from traditional model, census says

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- America continues to shift away from the "Ozzie and Harriet" family model of the 1950s, according to the 2000 census figures.

The changing face of the American household shows fewer traditional families, more homes composed of unmarried partners and an increase in the number of children living with single parents.

Fewer than one fourth (23.5 percent) of American households now are traditional nuclear families -- families composed of married couples with their children. The figure dropped from 25.6 percent in 1990. In 1960, it was 45 percent.

The number of unmarried partners living together, meanwhile, grew 72 percent between 1990 and 2000. It is unknown how many of those are same-sex partners.

The trend is even more pronounced in the Bible Belt, where several states outstripped the national rate of increase in this category. Texas showed an 88 percent increase in unmarried partners living together, compared with 108 percent for Georgia and 123 percent for Tennessee. According to news reports, in places where the practice once was taboo, people now joke about "living in sin."

Despite the growth, unmarried partners still represent a small percentage of all homes -- 5.5 percent, compared with 3.2 percent in 1990.

Single-father homes with children represented 3 percent of households in 2000 and showed a 62

percent increase over the past 10 years. North Carolina's number of households headed by single fathers increased 81 percent, while South Carolina's number increased 72 percent.

Single-mother homes with children represented 7 percent of households. From 1990 to 2000, this category increased 25 percent.

A Baptist ethicist urged congregations to pay heed to the new census data as they minister to their communities.

"These changes challenge church leaders to look more closely at congregational and community demographics in order to shape ministry and sharpen the choice of preaching texts and sermon topics," said Robert Parham, executive director of the Baptist Center for Ethics in Nashville, Tenn. "Good information can advance more effective ministry, providing real help for real families."

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-- By ABP staff

Ancient prayer taps modern concerns

By Mark Wingfield

DALLAS (ABP) -- If you've still got a "WWJD" bracelet lying around, it might be time to dust it off for a new application.

"What Would Jabez Do?" is the latest focus of Christian thought and conversation across the nation, due to the soaring popularity of a little book called "The Prayer of Jabez."

The book, written by Bruce Wilkinson, has sold 4.4 million copies and has been on the New York Times bestseller list for 11 consecutive weeks. It also tops the bestseller list for Publishers' Weekly and in some Christian bookstores has sold more copies than any individual book in the blockbuster "Left Behind" fiction series.

Wilkinson offers the prayer of an obscure Old Testament figure as a model for modern Christians to follow in seeking God's blessing on their lives and ministries. It is a prayer, he says, that "distills God's powerful will for your future."

Due to the book's popularity, churches are forming Jabez study groups, and Christians are reciting the prayer of Jabez daily as they seek to "enlarge their territory." Some churches are including the prayer as part of their Sunday worship routine.

The little four-part prayer is tucked away amid a string of genealogy in 1 Chronicles 4:9-10. The roll call of begats stops just long enough to declare that Jabez was "more honorable than his brothers" and to report on a prayer of Jabez that God answered.

That prayer states: "Oh, that you would bless me indeed and enlarge my territory, that your hand would be with me and that you would keep me from evil, that I may not cause pain."

Nothing more is known about Jabez from the Bible.

Yet millions of Americans today have become fascinated with this Old Testament figure and are seeking to emulate his simple prayer in hopes of finding God's blessing and enlarging their territory.

At First Baptist Church of Denton, Texas, Pastor Jeff Williams often closes his Sunday morning pastoral prayer by quoting the prayer of Jabez. The text of the prayer appears weekly on the church newsletter. Many church members have told the pastor how the prayer has made a difference in their lives.

In homes and offices across the land, individuals touched by the book's message have typed out the words to the prayer and posted them in conspicuous places.

At Trinity Baptist Church in San Antonio, 750 adults recently gathered at 50 homes for small-group Bible studies built around the Jabez book.

In churches seemingly everywhere, pastors are preaching sermons based on the prayer of Jabez.

When Pastor Buckner Fanning preached a Jabez sermon at Trinity Baptist Church, it "really hit home," said Associate Pastor Johnny White.

Likewise, a sermon series built around the four points of the Jabez prayer was well-received at First Baptist Church of Lewisville, Texas, reported Pastor Stephen Hatfield.

Wilkinson's book on Jabez is surprisingly small to be a bestseller. Its 94 pages aren't much larger than a postcard, and the entire book easily slips into a jacket or purse.

So what's the big deal?

"It's so concise and brief and very easily assimilated," White explained. "We have this short attention span in the world today. The short and brief and concise, easy-to-put-a-handle-on messages are symptomatic of our day."

Also, the book connects with many people at a point of need, said Ted Elmore, prayer coordinator for the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

"The bottom line is there's such a hunger in the hearts of people for the reality of God," he said. "They're tired of religion. They're hungry for God."

Not everyone is enamored with the craze. Some say the "bless-me" nature of the prayer is selfishly motivated and that just because the Bible says God answered Jabez doesn't mean that he'll answer everyone else.

Even critics, however acknowledge the book's influence.

"It connects with people's desire and longing to feel like they're blessed," said Jim Holliday, pastor of Lyndon Baptist Church in Louisville, Ky., and a book reviewer for the Kentucky Western Recorder.

"It ties in to people's desire to be affirmed and to have God's stamp of approval on them and on their lives," he added. "People are just hungry for that kind of affirmation and acceptance."

Dan Crawford, professor of prayer and spiritual formation at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, acknowledged some people may be prone to see the prayer as a magic formula. But the basic message of the book, rightly understood, is positive, he added.

"You have people reading about prayer who haven't thought about it in years," he surmised. "That's got to have some positive effect."

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'The Prayer of Jabez': What does it teach?

By Mark Wingfield

DALLAS (ABP) -- Does God intend to give his children certain blessings but only if they ask?

Does reciting the same prayer to God every day provide power?

Does praying daily for God to bless you and enlarge your territory violate the dictates of Christian humility and sacrifice?

Has the so-called "health and wealth" theology found a back door into Baptist congregations?

These are some of the theological questions raised by the breakaway popularity of Bruce Wilkinson's bestseller, "The Prayer of Jabez."

The book has been widely embraced by Baptist ministers and laypeople in recent weeks and has become the basis of small-group Bible studies and sermons in some churches.

In the book, Wilkinson, founder of Walk Thru the Bible Ministries in Atlanta, urges readers to "reach for an extraordinary life" by praying the prayer of Jabez daily.

He has prayed the prayer of Jabez every day for 30 years, he writes, and has found it to produce wonderful results in his life and ministry.

"The Jabez prayer distills God's powerful will for your future," Wilkinson admonishes.

The book breaks the prayer of 1 Chronicles 4:10 into four parts.

The first is "that you would bless me indeed."

"God really does have unclaimed blessings waiting for you, my friend," Wilkinson writes. He explains that praying for God's blessings for yourself "is not the self-centered act it might appear, but a supremely spiritual one and exactly the kind of request our Father longs to hear."

To "bless," according to Wilkinson, means to "ask for or to impart supernatural favor. When we ask for God's blessing, we're not asking for more of what we could get for ourselves."

Although by praying the prayer of Jabez, "your life will become marked by miracles," Wilkinson urges readers not to see the prayer as a means to get specific things. Jabez, he notes, "left it entirely up to God to decide what the blessings would be and where, when and how" they would be received.

To illustrate the importance of asking for God's blessing, Wilkinson tells a fable about a man named Mr. Jones who dies and goes to heaven, where he discovers a ribbon-tied box with his name on it. Inside the box, he learns, are "all the blessings God wanted to give him while he was on earth, but Mr. Jones had never asked."

Wilkinson explains: "Even though there is no limit to God's goodness, if you didn't ask him for a blessing yesterday, you didn't get all that you were supposed to have. That's the catch--if you don't ask for his blessing, you forfeit those that come to you only when you ask."

The second part of the prayer is to "enlarge my territory."

This means to "ask God to enlarge your life so you can make a greater impact for him," Wilkinson says. "When you start asking in earnest -- begging -- for more influence and responsibility with which to honor him, God will bring opportunities and people into your path."

The third part of the prayer is "that your hand would be with me."

This emphasizes the Christian's dependence upon God and inability to do God's work in human power alone, Wilkinson explains. "The hand of the Lord is so seldom experienced by even mature Christians that they don't miss it and don't ask for it. They hardly know it exists."

Finally, the prayer asks "that you would keep me from evil."

This is a prayer not to face temptation, Wilkinson says. "Most of us face too many temptations -- and therefore sin too often -- because we don't ask God to lead us away from temptation."

In conclusion, Wilkinson asserts that God does have favorites. "Equal access to God does not add up to equal reward. ... Simply put, God favors those who ask."

The nature of Wilkinson's message has drawn immediate comparisons among some critics to the health-and-wealth gospel of the televangelists. But Baptist advocates of the book say that's not what the book teaches at all.

"I don't see it as being prosperity theology," said Ted Elmore, director of the Baptist General Convention of Texas prayer office. "There are ample places in the Old and New Testaments where God does indeed want to bless his people."

Johnny White, associate pastor of Trinity Baptist Church in San Antonio, acknowledged the book "skates on the edge of health and wealth," but he does not believe that was Wilkinson's intent.

In using the book at Trinity, where 750 people recently discussed it in home Bible studies, "we've tried to focus on the natural human tendency to turn inward. We've tried to draw from that passage the outward focus -- bless me that I might reach out."

Even though he likes and advocates the prayer, it should not be seen as a "quick fix" or a "magic formula," said Jeff Williams, pastor of First Baptist Church of Denton, Texas.

At Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, prayer and spiritual formation professor Dan Crawford has been teaching about the prayer of Jabez for 15 years. When he does, however, he presents it as "a biblical example of when a man prayed a bold prayer and God said yes."

While he believes God answers all prayers, Crawford asserted that God doesn't always answer all prayers in the affirmative. "Sometimes God says no; sometimes God says wait."

The value of the Jabez model is to encourage Christians to pray boldly, Crawford said. It should not be construed as a "hocus-pocus magic formula," he warned.

Even so, scores of people are reporting that they have discovered life-changing results by praying the prayer of Jabez. Reviews of the book on Amazon.com, for example, are replete with dramatic testimonies, as is the book's own Web site, www.prayerofjabez.com.

Elmore said he and other members of his family have found personal blessings through the prayer of Jabez. Yet he understands how the prayer and the book might be misused.

"The danger is not with the prayer of Jabez itself," Elmore said. "The danger would be in interpretation."

A person who feels the need to pray this specific prayer as a formula to achieve God's blessing is "a person who's more concerned with prayer than the God who answers prayer," he said. "Our confidence is not in prayer; our confidence is in God."

White, likewise, has found the prayer of Jabez personally beneficial. And he's heard from other members of Trinity that they have too.

Yet it's not the only thing he prays, he said. "It would be missing the point to think this becomes the mantra of life."

Christians should not fall into using the prayer of Jabez as a "ritualistic prayer," Crawford added.

"It's biblical to see God as wanting to give us good things. That's throughout the Scriptures. I don't think it's totally dependent upon us asking for it in some kind of ritualistic prayer. It may depend more on faithfulness and how the circumstances fit in to God's overall plan.

"Sometimes God gives to us that which to him is good but to us doesn't appear as we want it," Crawford said. "He works things for his good."

With more than 4.4 million copies of the little book now in circulation and no end in sight to the sales explosion, Christians who attempt to draw attention to what they see as potential theological dangers in the book often get a chilly reception.

Jim Holliday, pastor of Lyndon Baptist Church in Louisville, Ky., writes book reviews for the Kentucky Western Recorder. He recently reviewed "The Prayer of Jabez" and panned it with a one star rating out of five possible stars.

Even members of his own congregation have questioned his judgment.

Yet he stands by his critique. "The book makes too much out of the prayer of Jabez," he asserted.

"If I were going to spend every day in a prayer discipline, I would much rather spend it with the prayer Jesus taught us," Holliday said. "There's probably more to be mined there in terms of spiritual development than in Jabez."

Holliday's view is shared by Mike Gunn, pastor of the non-denominational Mars Hill Christian Fellowship in Seattle. The contemporary congregation with roots in the Bible church movement has posted a bruising critique of Wilkinson's book on its Web site.

Gunn calls Wilkinson's book "a new low in the poor theology department" and nothing more than a fad.

"There are many great books on prayer," Gunn writes. "'The Prayer of Jabez' is not one of them. ... Stay away from anyone who pulls out an obscure verse from a genealogy and builds a theology around it."

Meanwhile, the marketing machine behind Christian publishing is working overtime to develop spin-off Jabez products. Versions geared to women, teens and children are planned, as are Bible study guides and videos. Plaques and cups already are available.

For his part, Wilkinson expressed shock at the success of the book, which began germinating in his mind 30 years ago as a student at Dallas Theological Seminary.

"We can't claim any credit or brilliance," he told the Dallas Morning News. "It's just God deciding Jabez prayed this prayer thousands of years ago, and maybe now it's time to get it answered."

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