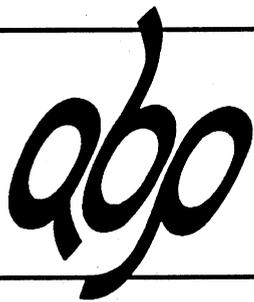


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**Supreme Court says Bible club  
can hold end-of-school meetings**

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U.S. Supreme Court ruled 6-3 that an elementary school in New York violated the free-speech rights of a Christian organization when it barred the group from holding after-school Bible and religion classes for children.

While many news reports have indicated justices reversed the lower court and ruled in favor of the Good News Club based on the separation of church and state, the majority actually based the decision on the First Amendment's free-speech guarantee. The majority ruled that the school discriminated against the club "because of its religious viewpoint in violation" of the Constitution.

In the opinion written by Associate Justice Clarence Thomas, the majority said issues in the case were similar to its holding in 1993 in *Lamb's Chapel vs. Center Moriches Union Free School District*, where a school district wrongly precluded a private group from presenting films at the school based solely on the religious perspective of the films.

Chief Justice William Rehnquist and Associate Justices Sandra Day O'Connor, Antonin Scalia and Anthony Kennedy joined the opinion. Justice Stephen Breyer joined only part of the majority's opinion and Scalia wrote a separate concurring opinion.

Justice John Paul Stevens filed a dissenting opinion. Justices David Souter and Ruth Bader Ginsburg issued a separate dissent.

"This case is undoubtedly close," Stevens wrote. "Distinguishing speech from a religious viewpoint, on the one hand, from religious proselytizing on the other, is comparable to distinguishing meetings to discuss political issues from meetings whose principal purpose is to recruit new members to join a political organization."

Stevens said if a school were to allow an after-school discussion of current events, it may not exclude people simply because it dislikes their opinions. "But must it therefore allow organized political groups -- for

example, the Democratic Party, the Libertarian Party, or the Ku Klux Klan -- to hold meetings, the principal purpose of which is not to discuss the current-events topic from their own unique view but rather to recruit others to join their respective groups? I think not," he continued.

Souter's dissent detailed the evangelistic effort of the Good News Club. "During the invitation, the teacher 'invited' the 'unsaved' children 'to trust the Lord Jesus to be your Savior from sin' and 'receive him as your Savior from sin.'"

"It is beyond question that Good News intends to use the public-school premises not for the mere discussion of a subject from a particular Christian point of view, but for an evangelical service of worship calling children to commit themselves in an act of Christian conversion," Souter said.

Since 1992, Milford Central School has had a policy allowing district residents to use school facilities "for social, civic and recreational meetings and entertainment events, provided that such uses shall be nonexclusive and shall be open to the general public."

It also states that school premises "shall not be used by an individual or organization for religious purposes." Groups such as the Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts and 4-H Club were among those using the school under the policy.

In 1996, the Good News Club -- affiliated with a Christian missionary organization known as Child Evangelism Fellowship -- applied to use the school's facilities.

After reviewing the club's program materials, Robert McGruder, interim superintendent of schools in the Milford School District, said the proposed activities were not merely discussion of secular subjects from a religious perspective, but "were in fact the equivalent of religious instruction itself."

The Milford Board of Education denied the application, and the club filed a complaint with a U.S. district court in March 1997, charging its free-speech, equal-protection and religious-freedom rights had been violated. The district ruled in favor of the school and the 2nd Circuit upheld the ruling.

Religious and civil-liberties groups were quick to comment on the case.

The Baptist Joint Committee filed a brief in support of the Good News Club as did the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission.

The BJC issued a statement following the decision. BJC General Counsel Holly Hollman said, "A policy that allows events pertaining to the welfare of the community, including the discussion of character and morals, cannot exclude the club based upon the manner in which it leads its discussions.

"This is clearly a free-speech case," she said. "The court recognized that the separation of church and state does not require the exclusion of the Good News Club."

The SBC's Richard Land, president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, said: "This decision is a victory for everyone who believes in true religious freedom. It is simply unconstitutional for any government to give access to non-school groups and then decide to bar access to other groups merely because they are religious."

But Barry Lynn, director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, called the decision a "terrible mistake."

"The court's ruling means aggressive fundamentalist evangelicals have a new way to proselytize school kids," he said, "The only good news here is that safeguards remain in place to prohibit evangelism during the day," Lynn added.

Also opposing the ruling was People For the American Way, a civil-liberties organization. "The Supreme Court's Good News decision is actually bad news for religious liberty," said Ralph Neas, president of PFAW Foundation.

"The decision threatens to open public schools all over the country to missionaries and other groups working to proselytize school children, thereby undermining the First Amendment's separation of church and state," he said.

## **SBC puts families on front burner**

By Marv Knox

NEW ORLEANS (ABP) -- Southern Baptists must rescue the American family from the precipice of peril, according to the first report from a task force created to do just that.

The Southern Baptist Council on Family Life presented guidelines for developing a family-saving strategy and creating "Great Commission Families" to the Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting June 12.

The next day, the convention approved a resolution calling for "covenant marriages," a step also designed to strengthen the family.

Peril facing the family punctuated several presentations during the SBC meeting in New Orleans.

"We believe it is time for us to decide as a convention that we're going to stand for the families in America," stressed Tom Elliff, a former SBC president, pastor of First Southern Baptist Church in Del City, Okla., and chairman of the family council.

The council cited a litany of American family woes, including:

-- "One million children a year see their parents divorce."

-- "Thirty-five percent of our nation's children live apart from their biological fathers."

-- "In the last 40 years, pregnancies out of wedlock have increased 600 percent."

-- "In less than 40 years, cohabitation by unmarried couples has increased almost 1,000 percent."

-- "Fifty percent of children who do not live with their fathers have never stepped foot in their father's home."

In his SBC president's address, James Merritt also emphasized the decline of families.

"There is an assault on the family today that is unparalleled in the history of the human race, and much of the damage is self-inflicted," said Merritt, pastor of First Baptist Church in Snellville, Ga.

"Increasingly, we are seeing fathers abdicate the throne of authority by allowing children to execute a bloodless coup of the home," he claimed. "Go to any mall in America, and you will see kids wandering aimlessly like rudderless ships with colored hair; Mohawk haircuts; rings coming out of noses, lips, eyelids and belly buttons, and you wonder, 'Where is Dad?'"

"No wonder, the inmates are running the asylum and the monkeys are running the zoo."

SBC Executive Committee President Morris Chapman, who proposed the family emphasis a year ago, also decried the decline of the family.

"For the first time ever, married couples with children make up less than 25 percent of the America population," Chapman said, citing 2000 U.S. Census data. That reflects a decline of about 2 percent in the decade of the 1990s.

Census data reveal the decline is due in part to Americans living longer, with more widows and widowers alive than ever before, as well as Americans as a whole waiting until later in life to get married and have children.

"It's our prayer and hope we'll be able to save the families of America," Chapman said.

In taking on that task, the Council on Family Life will not reproduce work of SBC agencies, he noted. The council "has been formed to sound the alarm that the traditional Judeo-Christian values of the family are under assault."

The council's interim report to the convention outlined five guidelines to structure its work as it develops long-term strategies.

The council noted a family-saving strategy must:

-- "Draw together both our resources and our people with the goal of elevating our families and the meaning of the word 'family' to God's standard as clearly stated in Scripture."

The SBC articulated that meaning in a 1998 amendment to the SBC "Baptist Faith and Message" statement. It gained most notoriety for stating wives should "graciously submit" to the "servant leadership" of their husbands.

-- "Deal with both our internal practices and the external perception of our convention."

This guideline would lead to strategies to help Americans see Southern Baptists as "great for the community because we are great for the family."

It also would address breakdowns in Southern Baptist families. "Sad to say, that even in the church too many marriages are meeting their Waterloos in divorce court," Merritt lamented. "We need to get back to the biblical understanding of marriage, that marriage is a divine covenant bound together in heaven that should never be broken before a holy God."

-- "Assist in the development of strong Great Commission-oriented families."

"Great Commission Families" will be based on "scriptural principles of moral purity and fidelity," practice consistent family devotionals, exhibit faithfulness to ministries of the local church, practice financial responsibility and participate in evangelizing non-believers.

-- "Enable pastors and church leaders to mutually identify and affirm key biblical principles for marriage and family."

In his president's address, Merritt insisted, "Our convention ought to be known as a family-friendly convention and as a convention that unapologetically stands for marriage between a man and a woman, period."

-- "Emphasize our desire to provide an authentic ministry to those whose lives and families have been fractured and ravaged by the adversary; seek to provide compassionate restoration and encouragement typified by our Savior, made possible by the grace of God and consistent with the clearly stated principles of the Scripture."

The status of marriage and related issues also was on the minds of messengers to the convention. Six items presented as motions or resolutions from the floor addressed homosexuality, with one calling on President Bush to declare June Heterosexual Family Pride Month.

The resolutions committee brought a statement on covenant marriage that passed without discussion or dissent.

The resolution encouraged Southern Baptists "to commit themselves to the biblical principles expressed by the covenant marriage movement.

The family council's task is large, Elliff acknowledged as he looked to its work over the coming year.

"Families are not going to be rescued simply because we hope so, simply because we think God owes us," he said. "But because we decide we're going to do something about it."

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## **SBC debates faith statement; rejects proposed amendments**

By Bob Allen

NEW ORLEANS (ABP) -- The biggest debate from last year's Southern Baptist Convention carried over into this year's meeting, as messengers turned back three attempts to amend the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message."

In one, Tony Woodell, a messenger from Pulaski Heights Baptist Church in Little Rock, Ark., petitioned the convention to restore a phrase deleted last year from the statement's article on the Bible: "The criterion by which Scripture is to be interpreted is Jesus Christ."

That change was one of the most hotly debated of a number of revisions approved to the SBC's official faith statement last year, the first major rewrite since 1963. A study committee proposing the revisions said abuse of the phrase allowed liberals to infiltrate seminaries and other convention agencies in the 1960s and 1970s. Opponents, however, said the article without the sentence makes an idol of the Bible by equating it with Christ.

"If we do not recognize that Jesus Christ is Lord over Scripture, we fail in our recognition that Jesus Christ is Lord of all," Woodell said in asking convention messengers to revisit the statement in New Orleans in 2001.

Richard Land, a member of last year's study committee that drafted the revised "Baptist Faith and Message," however, reminded messengers that last year's convention "resoundingly defeated" language similar to Woodell's proposed amendment.

"This sentence was used to try to set up a false dichotomy between Jesus and the rest of the Scripture," Land said. As an example, the president of the SBC Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission said seminary professors used to say, "If Jesus didn't talk about homosexuality, it wasn't important, even if the apostle Paul did."

A leading apologist for the criterion phrase, however, disputed Land's assessment.

"This idea that there is a false dichotomy proposed between Jesus and Scripture is a false statement," said Charles Wade, executive director of the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

"Those of us who believe the sentence, in all its elegant praise to Jesus Christ, should have been left in the 2000 statement want to be on record as saying we do believe in the full authority of Scripture," Wade told messengers this year.

Wade said defenders of the sentence have been "falsely accused" of using it to explain away problem passages.

"The New Testament interprets the Old Testament and Jesus Christ interprets all the Scripture," Wade argued. "There is no one who teaches us more about Scripture and how to understand it, how to interpret it and how to apply it than the Lord himself."

Another member of last year's committee countered that an editorial in Texas Baptists' official news journal illustrated for him that the convention was right in removing the phrase. Chuck Kelley, president of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, said the Baptist Standard suggested that Paul contradicted himself in writing about the roles of husbands and wives in Ephesians and "Jesus would help us understand which of Paul's two statements was right."

"Southern Baptists have always believed the whole Bible is the word of God," Kelley said.

Baptist Standard Editor Marv Knox said later that Kelley misrepresented his editorial, which said Jesus' words and examples should be the guide when trying to reconcile Bible passages that are seemingly "at odds" like Paul's words on submissive wives in Ephesians and "there is neither male nor female" in Galatians.

"Jesus' words and actions clarify and separate the timeless and universal from the culturally specific," Knox quoted from part of the editorial.

Wade, who has cited disagreement over the new "Baptist Faith and Message" as a cause of recent tension between the SBC and its largest affiliated state convention, told reporters he "didn't want to cause trouble" but felt the issue was too important to ignore. He said he had "been pleased" that SBC leaders up to that point had resisted criticizing the BGCT during the June 12-13 convention.

Messengers overwhelmingly rejected Woodell's amendment, however, along with another amendment offered to the article on Scripture and one on the Lord's Day.

Fred Malone of Clinton, La., suggested that a new article on the Lord's Day "inadvertently" weakened Baptists' commitment to the Sabbath by leaving appropriate activity up to an individual's conscience. He sought to strengthen it by adding an appeal to Scripture.

"In the last 50 years we have lost the culture war on our Lord's Day," Malone said.

A member of the study committee, however, said it would be "reckless" for the convention to continue to tinker with its faith statement year after year.

"Southern Baptists need to be clear about where we stand and what we believe," said Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

A third amendment, offered by messenger Steve Barrett of Waseca, Minn., sought to remove a reference to "religious" opinions in the article on biblical authority, arguing that the Bible is "sufficient" in all realms of knowledge.

Mohler responded that current language "by no means seeks to limit" the Bible's authority.

Speaking against Barrett's amendment, messenger Wiley Drake of Buena Park, Calif., cited two reasons for his opposition.

"My mother said don't try to pick the black specks out of black pepper," he said. "Let's don't argue until Jesus comes. Let's get on with preaching the gospel."

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## **Wrapup: SBC focuses on the family in quiet, small convention**

By By Bob Allen and Marv Knox

NEW ORLEANS (ABP) -- Departing from a recent trend of grabbing headlines in their annual meeting, Southern Baptists this year focused on the family in a quiet convention with a smaller-than-normal crowd.

A blue-ribbon Council on Family Life presented guidelines for developing a family-saving strategy and creating "Great Commission Families" to the annual meeting.

The convention later approved a resolution calling for "covenant marriages," a step also designed to strengthen the family.

Building on the family theme, Focus on the Family founder and president James Dobson closed out the June 12-13 Southern Baptist Convention in New Orleans via a satellite feed made necessary by travel problems.

"I am so excited about what you have just done," Dobson said. "I know of no other denomination that has taken the steps you have taken today to preserve the family unit. You have taken leadership."

Peril facing the family punctuated several presentations during the meeting.

"We believe it is time for us to decide as a convention that we're going to stand for the families in America," stressed Tom Elliff, a former SBC president, pastor of First Southern Baptist Church in Del City, Okla., and chairman of the family council.

In his SBC president's address, James Merritt also emphasized the decline of families.

"There is an assault on the family today that is unparalleled in the history of the human race, and much of the damage is self-inflicted," said Merritt, pastor of First Baptist Church in Snellville, Ga.

"Increasingly, we are seeing fathers abdicate the throne of authority by allowing children to execute a bloodless coup of the home," he claimed. "Go to any mall in America, and you will see kids wandering aimlessly like rudderless ships with colored hair; Mohawk haircuts; rings coming out of noses, lips, eyelids and belly buttons, and you wonder, 'Where is Dad?'"

SBC Executive Committee President Morris Chapman, who proposed the family emphasis a year ago, also decried the decline of the family.

"For the first time ever, married couples with children make up less than 25 percent of the America population," Chapman said, citing 2000 U.S. Census data. That reflects a decline of about 2 percent in the decade of the 1990s.

"It's our prayer and hope we'll be able to save the families of America," Chapman said.

In an historic first, an African American delivered the largely white convention's keynote sermon.

Fred Luter, pastor of Franklin Avenue Baptist Church in New Orleans, acknowledged the honor and paid tribute to other black leaders who preceded him in Southern Baptist life.

"Tonight I realize that I'm standing on the shoulders of other African-American pastors and denominational workers ... who were trailblazers long before I ever was a Southern Baptist," he said. "My brothers, I honor you for your commitment to the Lord and to this convention. I want to make it known tonight, I am standing on your shoulders."

With 9,559 messengers registered just prior to the final SBC session Wednesday afternoon, it was the smallest convention since 1973 in Portland, Ore. The last meeting as small in a Southern city was Oklahoma City in 1949.

Not only have the sizes of recent SBC annual meetings been a fraction of the 45,519 record crowd in 1985 in Dallas, registered during the height of denominational conflict, the decline carried over into the 1990s.

The last time the SBC met in New Orleans, 1996, more than 13,000 messengers were registered. Last year's meeting in Orlando, Fla., drew 11,800.

Observers attribute the decline to the absence of moderates, who are sitting out the annual gathering because of the convention's increasingly rigid stands.

"They're certainly a loss to our fellowship," SBC spokesman Bill Merrell told the Associated Press. But he pointed out that the last decade has also caused those still involved to recommit to conservative doctrines.

Those reforms included a 1998 family amendment to the "Baptist Faith and Message" that, among other things, called on wives to submit to their husband's "servant leadership." A complete rewrite of the faith statement last year yielded other controversial changes, including a view that the Bible forbids women from serving as senior pastors and removal of a phrase setting Christ as the standard for biblical interpretation.

Moderates gave up on political efforts to retain control of the SBC after a demoralizing 1990 meeting, also in New Orleans. They have since poured energy into developing alternative structures. The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship celebrates its 10th anniversary later this month in Atlanta. In the last year, a network calling itself Mainstream Baptists has expanded into 12 state chapters.

Merritt said he wasn't disappointed by attendance, blaming weather-related travel problems for many no-shows. Without the massive floods in east Texas, Merritt estimated the crowd would have been in the 11,000-12,000 range

"I think the attendance has been very strong, all things considered," he said.

In contrast to recent years, when Southern Baptists grabbed headlines with resolutions calling for evangelization of Jews and the Disney boycott, messengers this year avoided divisive resolutions, adopting nine position statements without discussion.

SBC resolutions affirmed covenant marriage and giving to world hunger. Others opposed human cloning, genocide in Sudan, Internet pornography, euthanasia in the Netherlands, discrimination against military chaplains and efforts to limit free speech in campaign-finance legislation.

"We tried to bring forward resolutions that we could state in a positive way and that Southern Baptists are of one mind on," said Danny Akin, chairman of this year's Resolutions Committee. "I think you'd be hard-pressed to find anyone at this convention who is on the flipside of these issues."

In other business, messengers adopted a \$178 million budget, with nearly 73 percent earmarked for international and North American missions. Seminaries will receive another 21 percent, the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission 1.5 percent and an operating budget of \$5.5 million, or 3.3 percent, goes to the SBC Executive Committee.

The convention re-elected Merritt to a traditional second one-year term as president. Ed Litton, pastor of First Baptist Church in North Mobile, Ala., won a contested race for first-vice president over Ted Stone, a

minister from Durham, N.C., by a vote of 2,176-636.

T.C. Pinckney, a retired Air Force general and conservative leader in Virginia, was elected second-vice president by acclamation.

Registration secretary Lee Porter won a 25th term over Jim Wells 1,717-950. Oklahoma Baptist Messenger editor John Yeats went unchallenged for a fifth term as recording secretary.

About 1,200 volunteers from across the United States arrived early to work with 41 local churches in "Crossover" events including block parties, door-to-door witnessing and media advertising. An official of the sponsoring North American Mission Board reported 1,041 professions of faith as a result of Crossover events.

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## **Southern Baptists avoid controversy in resolutions**

By Bob Allen

NEW ORLEANS (ABP) -- This year's Southern Baptist Convention avoided divisive resolutions, adopting nine statements without discussion.

SBC resolutions affirmed Covenant Marriage and giving to world hunger. Others opposed human cloning, genocide in Sudan, Internet pornography, euthanasia in the Netherlands, discrimination against military chaplains and efforts to limit free speech in campaign-finance legislation.

"We tried to bring forward resolutions that we could state in a positive way and that Southern Baptists are of one mind on," said Danny Akin, chairman of this year's Resolutions Committee. "I think you'd be hard-pressed to find anyone at this convention who is on the flipside of these issues."

A resolution on Covenant Marriage applauded states that have advanced the movement and encouraged Southern Baptists to commit to "biblical principles" in marriage.

A hunger resolution noted that if every Southern Baptist would give \$1 a month to world hunger, giving to hunger would multiply 18-fold. It encouraged church members to "support systematically the Southern Baptist World Hunger Fund."

A resolution on discrimination against military chaplains cited recent lawsuits claiming that the Navy discriminates against evangelicals while giving advantage to liturgical denominations. The resolution renounced "any unconstitutional treatment of Southern Baptist chaplains" and called for policies to "insure free religious practice for all military personnel."

Another resolution opposed cloning and embryo research, urging Congress to "enact a permanent, comprehensive ban on human cloning."

Another targeted the "plague of Internet pornography," and called on libraries and families to use Internet filters and on Internet service providers to remove links to pornography from their home pages.

One SBC resolution criticized the Netherlands for legalizing euthanasia and assisted suicide, calling on other nations to "express moral outrage" and urge the Dutch to change their policy.

Another objected to proposed campaign-finance legislation that limits political speech by individuals and organizations. "We reject any campaign-finance legislation that hinders or abridges free speech," the resolution stated.

A ninth resolution expressed appreciation to the host city and convention leaders.

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## **African-American pastor delivers convention sermon**

By Lacy Thompson

NEW ORLEANS (ABP) -- Fred Luter made history at this year's Southern Baptist Convention -- and brought thousands of annual meeting messengers to their feet in doing it.

In delivering a full-throttle convention sermon, Luter became the first African American to bring the annual address in the denomination's history.

He made the most of it, delivering a message that was interrupted several times by applause and that ended with messengers on their feet, calling Luter back to the podium for a final exhortation.

In many ways, it was a fitting honor for an amazing story.

In 1986, Luter was a street preacher in New Orleans when Louisiana Baptist leaders asked him to become pastor at Franklin Avenue Baptist Church.

The New Orleans congregation had undergone inner-city transition and was down to a few dozen members. Although Luter never had served as a pastor, Louisiana Baptist leaders entrusted him with the church. They also made it plain that he was to bury it or resurrect it. Whichever one it turned out to be was up to Luter, they said.

Luter chose not to preside over a funeral. Instead, he launched a three-pronged ministry focusing on biblical preaching, discipling men and establishing a sense of accountability among church leaders and members.

Things began to change -- and then, they began to explode.

By the end of the century, the church had grown to one of the largest in the state, numbering more than 6,000 members and standing as a perennial state leader in baptisms.

Meanwhile, as Luter's story became known, Southern Baptist leaders embraced the young pastor. He began to speak across the convention. He even was elected as second vice president of the national body in 1996, the last time the annual meeting was held in New Orleans.

Upon its return to New Orleans last week, Luter again was a focus of attention.

Messengers applauded as SBC President James Merritt affirmed Luter would be the first African American to deliver the annual sermon.

However, Merritt quickly added: "But the reason Dr. Fred Luter is preaching tonight has absolutely nothing to do about the color of his skin. The reason Dr. Fred Luter is preaching tonight is because he is one of the premier inspirational preachers in the Southern Baptist Convention."

For his part, Luter quickly acknowledged the honor and paid tribute to African-American leaders who have preceded him in Southern Baptist life.

"Tonight I realize that I'm standing on the shoulders of other African-American pastors and denominational workers ... who were trailblazers long before I ever was a Southern Baptist, " he said. "My brothers, I honor you for your commitment to the Lord and to this convention. I want to make it known tonight, I am standing on your shoulders."

Luter then launched his sermon, based on Matthew 9:35-38, in which Jesus is moved by the plight of people and calls on his followers to pray for God to send more laborers to reap the plentiful harvest.

As other speakers before him, Luter focused squarely on the convention theme of evangelism. "The theme of this convention is 'Until he comes, go,'" he noted.

"But the question of tonight is -- are we doing just that?"

Luter asked messengers to consider what a tragedy it would be to have a fish that could not swim or a dog that could not bark or a cat that could not meow or so on.

"Think about it," he urged. "It would be really sad, really tragic for none of those things to do what

God created them to do. ... But all of those things do what God created them to do."

In contrast, consider the pain God must feel when humans do not do what he has created them to do, Luter added.

"Think of the hurt God feels when men don't want to be men. Think of the hurt God feels when women don't want to be women. Think of the hurt God feels when husbands don't love and wives don't respect their husbands. Think of the hurt God feels when teenagers and children don't respect their parents in the Lord. Think of the hurt God feels when preachers don't practice what they preach," Luter emphasized.

"It's no wonder our nation is messed up. When people don't do what God created them to do, we reap the consequences. ... And that's why, Southern Baptists, the master is calling for laborers."

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## **Southern Baptist leader calls churches to 'battle'**

By Bob Allen

NEW ORLEANS (ABP) -- Southern Baptist Convention president James Merritt urged convention messengers June 12 to wage a "Battle of New Orleans" against a godless society, theological error and evangelistic complacency.

"We're known to many outside this arena as those battling Baptists," Merritt told about 9,000 messengers at the Louisiana Superdome in New Orleans. "That doesn't concern me. What does concern me is that we make sure we fight the right battles."

Merritt said in his president's address that "41,000 Southern Baptist pulpits must not be silent" in the face of America's social problems.

Merritt, pastor of First Baptist Church in Snellville, Ga., cited abortion, mockery of Christians in the media, violent and sexual themes in popular music and efforts to mute the Christian message as issues that the nation's largest evangelical body must address.

"There is a cultural rebellion we must confront," Merritt said. "That is a battle worth fighting."

Merritt warned equally against "a doctrinal recklessness" creeping into churches and society.

"I do not believe we ought to be heresy hunters, but I do believe we ought to be heresy fighters," he said.

Merritt criticized a Baptist association in Atlanta's rationale for refusing to discipline two gay-friendly churches as local-church autonomy.

"I believe in local-church autonomy," Merritt said. "I don't want any leader, any agency, any institution or any convention giving orders to my congregation."

However, he added: "The ocean of church autonomy stops at the shore of biblical authority. Local autonomy without biblical authority becomes spiritual anarchy."

Merritt said Southern Baptists ought to defend the Bible as God's word "with pride."

"There is no doubt in my mind that God has blessed Southern Baptists because we have honored his word," he said. "This book alone is the word of God."

However, the SBC president said correct doctrine is not enough.

"My greatest fear for the Southern Baptist Convention is not live liberalism. It is dead orthodoxy," Merritt said. "I fear with all of my heart becoming a denomination that is straight as a gun barrel doctrinally and dry as a gun barrel spiritually."

Merritt announced a new initiative to involve Southern Baptists in personal evangelism.

Merritt challenged 16 million Southern Baptists to "win at least one soul" to Christ. Working with the North American Mission Board, Merritt proclaimed the first Sunday in October "Saved to Share Sunday." The emphasis calls for allowing time in worship for congregants to write out a personal testimony and pledge to share it with at least one person over the next 30 to 60 days.

"The Great Commission does not say come and sit, it says go and tell," Merritt said.

Merritt said he hoped the effort would "ignite a fire of evangelism that will burn from ocean to ocean in America."

Later, messengers re-elected the 48-year-old Merritt to a traditional second one-year term as president.

"He has been a leader of whom Southern Baptists have been rightfully proud," seminary president Albert Mohler said in nominating Merritt. "He has been faithful. He has been forceful. He has been fearless. He has led us wisely. He has led us winsomely. He has led us well."

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