



Associated Baptist Press

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September 17, 2001

SOUTHERN BAPTIST HISTORICAL (01-75)
LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES
Nashville, Tennessee

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SEP 25 2001

Nation gathers to worship after terrorist attacks

By Bob Allen

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Just three days after terrorist attacks on America, the nation's "responsibility to history is already clear," President Bush said at a National Day of Prayer and Remembrance service at the National Cathedral in Washington: "to answer these attacks and rid the world of evil."

"War has been waged against us by stealth and deceit and murder," Bush said. "This nation is peaceful, but fierce when stirred to anger. This conflict was begun on the timing and terms of others. It will end in a way, and at an hour, of our choosing."

Richard Land, president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, saluted the president's determination to conduct an all-out campaign against terrorism.

"As Christians we must pray for our enemies and we cannot seek personal revenge," Land said. "However, we should expect our government to exact justice against evil."

Millions of Americans found solace in houses of worship Sunday, Sept. 16. Many churches reported crowds as large as those at Christmas or Easter.

National Public Radio reported from a worship service at Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas. "We've been dealt a wicked blow this week as a nation," Pastor George Mason said to about 1,000 worshippers. "Many of us have been to prayer meetings already. We've held candles in the night. We've prayed and done what we can do. It's right to be here now."

Mason addressed the terrorist attackers directly in part of his message. Acknowledging "grievances against America that fueled your rage," he confessed the United States is "not always right or righteous" in its policies toward Arab countries.

"We are capable of repenting of our sins and living differently," Mason said, "but what you have done is to cut out the heart of our desire to learn."

Larry McSwain, interim pastor of Hendricks Avenue Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Fla., said attacks on the Pentagon, World Trade Center and in Pennsylvania exposed a false sense of security based on military and economic power. "There's no such thing as a human defense against the power of evil," he said.

At South Garland Baptist Church near Dallas, Pastor Larry Davis called children to the front of the sanctuary for a special message. "Evil people do evil things," he explained to the children. But borrowing from Presbyterian minister and children's TV host Fred Rogers, he counseled, "Always look for the helpers,"

encouraging children to focus on firefighters, police and volunteers who were doing good work rather than the perpetrators.

Jim Somerville, pastor of First Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., said the goal of terrorism is to overthrow the nation by paralyzing its citizens with fear. "When we reach that point, the terrorist has won, and I, for one, don't intend to give him that satisfaction. I refuse to be afraid."

Somerville quoted Psalm 23, where the writer claims that even while walking through the valley of the shadow of death he will "fear no evil."

"Why? Because God is with him," Somerville said, describing the passage as an "antidote to fear."

"God's presence is what will make it possible for us to walk through this shadowy valley without being afraid," he said.

Robert Ferguson, pastor of Trinity Baptist Church in Seneca, S.C., described part of his struggle in deciding what to say.

"I have preached sermons on finding the hand of God in tragedy," he said. "I have counseled hundreds of persons on how to deal with tragedy and still maintain one's faith. Now, all of those seemed to pale in significance to the enormous evil before me."

The answer, he said, is in Christ's resurrection, which demonstrates that evil will not triumph over good. "God is here, God is good, and God has neither abandoned us nor caused this to happen," Ferguson said.

Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, Calif., wrote an editorial titled "Why Does God Allow Evil?" for the Orange County Register.

"God could have kept the terrorists from completing their suicidal missions by removing their ability to choose their own will instead of his," he wrote. "But to be fair, God would also have to do that to all of us. You and I are not terrorists, but we do harm and hurt others with our own selfish decisions and actions."

"You may hear misguided minds say 'This must have been God's will,'" Warren continued. "Nonsense! In a world of free choices, God's will is rarely done! Doing our own will is much more common. Don't blame God for this tragedy. Blame people who ignored what God has told us to do: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

Layne Smith, pastor of Viewmont Baptist Church in Hickory, N.C., said he has been tempted to "peek out the corner" of his eyes at those who are different and say "at least I'm not like him or her."

"I must confess that I have done that towards those who planned and carried out the attacks that killed more than 5,000 this past week," he said. "How many times have I said, 'Thank you God, that I'm not like those people?'"

"However, to approach it that way is to miss the point. We don't justify ourselves by looking out of the corner of our eyes at others like the Pharisee did to the tax collector. No, we are invited to peer down into the shadows of our own hearts and recognize the darkness within us that only the light of the world can overcome."

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Bush appoints Land to government panel

By Bob Allen

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- President Bush announced Sept. 17 that he plans to appoint Southern Baptist leader Richard Land to a two-year term on the United States Commission on Religious Freedom.

Land has been president and treasurer of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, the Southern Baptist Convention's agency for social, moral and religious-liberty concerns, since 1988.

In that position, he serves as host of the commission's "For Faith and Family" talk-radio program that is broadcast at stations across the country and over the Internet. He was an architect of the SBC's boycott of Disney and served on committees that drafted both a family article for the "Baptist Faith and Message" in 1998 calling on wives to "submit graciously" to their husbands and a complete rewrite of the confessional statement two years later.

Before working for the SBC, he was a professor and administrator at Criswell College and an associate pastor at First Baptist Church in Dallas.

Land took an 18-month leave of absence from Criswell College in 1987 and 1988 to work as an administrative assistant to then-Texas Gov. William Clements. In that role, he served as senior adviser to the Republican governor on church-state issues and matters relating to "traditional family values," including abortion, drugs and pornography.

A native of Houston, Land received a bachelor's degree from Princeton University in 1969, a master's from New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary in 1972 and a doctorate from Oxford University.

Created by a 1998 law designed to make religious freedom central to U.S. foreign policy, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom monitors governments around the world and recommends action against those that deny religious freedom.

Land, who has been vocal about the persecution of Christians around the globe, is one of three Bush appointees to serve terms ending May 14, 2003.

Also named by Bush were William Francis Murphy, bishop of the Archdiocese of Rockville Centre in New York, and Shirin Raziuddin Tahir-Kheli, director of the South Asia Program at Johns Hopkins University.

The 1998 International Religious Freedom Act allows the president to appoint three members to the panel and the congressional leaders from the president's party to appoint two more. Congressional leaders from the president's opposing party name the other four voting members. A 10th, nonvoting, member of the panel will be a yet-unnamed Bush appointee to head the State Department's office on religious freedom.

The commission job is part time, and Land won't have to leave his SBC job. Commission members are not paid, but they are reimbursed for travel and other expenses and considered government employees.

Land has been a backer of the 1998 religious-freedom law from its inception. While he originally advocated a stronger bill that carried mandatory sanctions for violators of religious freedom, he later threw his support to a compromise -- giving the administration more discretion about whether to impose sanctions -- that eventually became law.

Before that, Land led the SBC to pass a 1997 resolution calling on the U.S. government to "elevate religious-liberty concerns to the highest priority in foreign policy." The statement also urged Americans "to refrain from international trade, even at the risk of financial loss, with or in nations that practice religious persecution."

He has written that more Christians were persecuted for their faith in the 20th century than in all previous centuries combined. He has urged Southern Baptists and other Christians to demand that the government crack down on nations that suppress Christianity and credited pressure from Christians for passage of the International Religious Freedom Act.

But in its first two years, the commission's concern has been broader than just Christianity. Lawmakers who were in the beginning wary of a religious-freedom measure feared the Religious Right would emphasize persecution of Christians at the expense of other faiths. The commission has taken pains to avoid criticism that it is concerned only with Christians.

Land has supported the religious-liberty commission's call for sanctions against Sudan for persecution of Christians and criticized the Clinton administration for lacking "the moral spine" to get tougher with the "outlaw, war-criminal regime in Khartoum."

He also has backed the commission's call to attack the pocketbooks of companies that do business in countries engaged in persecution.

Land has been criticized for alluding to Christian persecution in America by those who say such rhetoric diminishes atrocities committed in other countries. Land once countered in a panel discussion that "persecution is too strong a word at present" to use in reference to the U.S., but he warned that "harassment, suppression and discrimination unprotested and uncorrected will become persecution."

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-- Kenny Byrd contributed to this story.

Falwell says terrorism indicates removal of divine protection

By Bob Allen

LYNCHBURG, Va. (ABP) -- Terrorist attacks in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania are signs that God has removed divine protection because of America's sin, Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson said Sept. 13 on Robertson's "700 Club" television program.

Falwell, a long-time Independent Baptist who led his 22,000-member Thomas Road Baptist Church into the Southern Baptist Convention in 1997, concurred with earlier remarks by Robertson that abortion, pornography and the removal of prayer from public schools have "insulted" God.

Noting that God has "protected" the United States from direct attack by a foreign power since the War of 1812, Falwell called attacks from enemies "probably what we deserve."

"The ACLU has got to take a lot of blame for this," Falwell said. He blamed the civil-liberties group for "with the help of the federal court system, throwing God out of the public square, out of the schools."

"I really believe the pagans, the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People For the American Way, all of them who have tried to secularize America, I point the finger in their face and say 'you helped this happen,'" Falwell said.

Moderate Baptists quickly condemned Falwell's comments.

Bill Leonard, dean of Wake Forest University Divinity School, called Falwell's remarks "a mistaken effort to sound prophetic," according to the New York Times. "God created the world with terrible freedom, and part of that freedom," he said, is "to do terrible evil."

Jim Baucom, moderator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, said in a statement he "was shocked and embarrassed by such a spirit of condemnation, especially at a time like this."

"No minister -- especially of national stature -- should hurl such judgments at the citizens of our great nation without days and weeks of introspective forethought," said Baucom, who, like Falwell, ministers in Lynchburg, Va.

"Even if they believe that the terrorist attacks America has suffered are a sign of God's wrathful judgment, which is a problem in itself, how can they be so certain that they are not among those being judged?" the pastor of Lynchburg's Rivermont Avenue Baptist Church continued. "Jesus himself addressed this sort of pharisaical posture with the words, 'Let he who is without sin cast the first stone.'"

David Currie, executive director of Texas Baptists Committed, termed Falwell's comments "not an example of healthy Christian theology but an example of sick bigotry and opportunism for his own agenda."

"His remarks reflect an understanding of the character of God which is not biblical or Christian and should be condemned by all compassionate and thinking Christians," Currie said. "To think he is now a prominent Southern Baptist is an embarrassment to all Baptists."

Robert Parham, executive director of the Baptist Center for Ethics, quoted a verse from the New Testament in his response. "Falwell's comments are another shameful example of the biblical truth that the tongue 'is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison,'" Parham said, citing James 3:8.

Also on the "700 Club" broadcast, Falwell said something good could come out of the tragedy. "This could be -- if we will fast and pray -- this could be God's call to revival," he said.

Later Sept. 13 in a phone call to CNN, Falwell said he didn't mean to blame lesbians and gays for terrorism.

"I would never blame any human being except the terrorists, and if I left that impression with gays or lesbians or anyone else, I apologize," he said.

Falwell also issued a statement after major newspapers reported his comments Sept. 14.

"I sincerely regret that comments I made during a long theological discussion on a Christian television program yesterday were taken out of their context and reported, and that my thoughts -- reduced to sound bites -- have detracted from the spirit of this day of mourning," Falwell said.

"Today, I join millions of people throughout this nation and around the world in remembering all those who died, and praying for our nation, the victims of this travesty, and their loved ones," he said.

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