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Southern Baptist evangelist riles Muslims with comments

By John Hall

HOUSTON (ABP) -- While religious and national leaders including President Bush urged tolerance for Muslim Americans following terrorist attacks Sept. 11, a Southern Baptist evangelist speaking at Houston Baptist University compared Islam's founder to Satan and told a Muslim student he is bound for hell.

Both Muslim and Christian students said they were offended by statements of evangelist Anis Shorrosh, delivered two days after deadly attacks in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania

Shorrosh, a popular evangelistic preacher known for staging public debates with Muslim leaders, had been invited to speak at the university about the basic tenets of Islam. After he termed Islam a false religion and quoted a Bible verse comparing Mohammed to Satan, however, a group of students walked out on Shorrosh.

A small group of Muslims later met with the evangelist to discuss his views. According to a report in the university's student newspaper, The Collegian, a heated conversation followed.

One student accused Shorrosh of stereotyping all Muslims without knowing them or their beliefs.

Shorrosh responded: "Your religion is a lie. Your Allah (god) is the devil himself."

A second Muslim student then condemned Shorrosh to hell. Shorrosh countered, "No, you are going to hell."

As the discussion was dying down, Shorrosh roused the crowd again. Saying, "Those students were so angry, if they had had a knife they would have killed me."

The newspaper report said the Muslim students responded with "comments suggesting that his attempted assassins 'should have cut off (his) head.'"

The verbal fighting ended with each side again condemning the other in the presence of students, staff and faculty.

University officials denounced and apologized for Shorrosh's statements.

"You don't invite someone to come to your house to insult you," HBU President Doug Hodo said in a "letter to the university family" that appeared in a special edition of the campus paper that afternoon.

"Unfortunately our 'guest' insulted our students, faculty and staff," Hodo said. "Events of Thursday hurt many of you and me, and the words of our speaker caused great pain."

Jack Purcell, the school's vice president for student affairs, said the university does not have a problem with Shorrosh's basic argument that Muslims, who regard Christ a prophet but not divine, are lost, because that is a common Christian viewpoint.

But Shorrosh should have been more sensitive to his audience at such an emotional time in the nation, Purcell said.

"This issue is not what was said but how it was said," he commented. "When you're in an environment of people with other faiths, you don't insult them. I don't think you have to apologize for your theology, but you don't have to say it in a way that is intentionally insulting in a setting where you are speaking to an audience of several faiths."

Shorrosh expressed no remorse about his comments.

He claimed that while many so-called Muslims are peaceful people, the true followers of Allah are violent. He said Muslims have tried to kill him several times as he has attempted to evangelize or debate them.

"I sincerely love all Muslims," Shorrosh said. "I am one of thousands of Christians who every Friday night fast and pray for the fall of Islam."

Shorrosh said all Muslims who have entered the country since 1991 and cannot prove they are not connected with any terrorist organizations should be deported.

He said the United States should call all U.S. citizens back to America and drop atomic bombs on the capitals of several countries in the Middle East.

University officials called a campus-wide meeting the next afternoon to discuss Shorrosh's comments. About 275 students participated in a question-and-answer session with several administrators.

Because of this meeting, as well as many individual meetings with Muslim students, the student body has begun discussing interfaith relations more thoroughly, Purcell said.

"That is the good thing that has come out of this -- that there has been increased dialogue between Christian and Muslim students," he said.

Shorrosh's outspoken views on Islam are nothing new.

Commenting on 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, Shorrosh told Baptist Press that such violence is an ever-present possibility among Muslim extremists. He said Muslims play the role of peace-loving citizens in countries where they are a minority but in every nation with an Islamic majority, there is a dictatorship.

"Islam is the most insecure religion on earth," Shorrosh said in an interview in 1996 with the Alabama Baptist newspaper. "It is also the bloodiest."

The Alabama-based evangelist has written several books, including "Islam Revealed" in 1988, which challenges the truthfulness of the Koran, the Muslim Scripture.

Born in Nazareth and converted to Christianity at 18, Shorrosh traveled to the United States at 19 to attend Baptist-affiliated Mississippi College. He went on to earn a master's at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary and a doctorate from Luther Rice Seminary.

He was a pastor and evangelist in the Middle East before forming the Anis Shorrosh Evangelistic Association, a ministry to Muslims.

He is best known for a 1985 debate with Sheikh Ahmed Deedat of Durban, which was taped and has been played throughout the Muslim world.

Shorrosh has been criticized in the past by some Christians who say putting Muslims on the defensive is not the best way to win them to Christ.

But Shorrosh said he got his method from the Bible. "We have tried the dialogue system for so long," he said in a 1992 interview. "We've tried friendship evangelism and talking with them sweetly, and one comes here, one comes there. We have not used the confrontational system. But Paul, you see, dealt with debates. He

confronted the cults and religions of the ancient world. At Athens, he tried to explain things. Jesus used that system, and so did Stephen and others."

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-- Bob Allen contributed to this story.

Texans find unexpected ministry in New York

By George Henson

NEW YORK (ABP) -- A staff member at a Baptist church in Plano, Texas, urged volunteers embarking on a mission trip to keep two things in mind. "Be patient and stay flexible," advised Glenn Sampson, director of missions-ministries development at Parkway Hills Baptist Church, in a cover letter to a church group headed for New York City. "The attached activities schedule is very much subject to change."

Little did he know.

Three days into the planned project to help East 7th Street Baptist Church and its Graffiti Mission minister to the diverse community in lower Manhattan, terrorist hijackers aimed passenger-filled jetliners at the nearby World Trade Center, killing thousands of unsuspecting victims and bringing the nation to its knees.

Once a rundown area primarily populated by people living in abandoned buildings without running water, electricity or heat, the community recently had begun to bounce back, with luxury apartments now renting for \$2,000 to \$3,000 per month. Formerly a mission to the down and out, the congregation and Baptist center now encountered two worlds.

"Models, doctors, lawyers, students, the homeless and the very poor walk past each other, not speaking to each other, and probably not even seeing each other," Sampson said.

The mission team attended church Sunday morning, Sept. 9, went sightseeing to the observation deck at the World Trade Center and then caught the subway to Manhattan's Lower East Side.

Monday, they helped with a sale of heavily discounted school supplies to neighborhood residents. They didn't know it, but that would be the last thing on their itinerary to go as planned.

The next morning, team member Brenda Fish was sitting on steps reading her Bible when she heard a loud crash. Other members of the team soon began walking to the 14th Street subway station. On the way, a passerby told them a plane had hit the World Trade Center.

"We thought it must be an accident," Sampson said. "At that time, we thought a small plane must have hit the building. But we didn't understand how a small plane could have made such a big hole, and we couldn't see how it could have gotten so far off course on such a bright, clear day. A lot of things weren't making sense for us at that time."

They also remembered visiting the World Trade Center's observation deck just two days earlier.

"When we heard the first report, the first thought was: 'That's not the tower with the observation deck. We would have been OK,'" Sampson recalled. Those comforting thoughts were short-lived, however.

By the time the group reached 10th Street, they could see the gaping hole from the impact. They took a photograph and prayed that the loss of life would be minimal.

They proceeded by subway to Metro Baptist Church on 40th Street. While on the way, they learned of the attack of the second plane. Like millions of Americans watching live on TV, they instantly realized the first impact wasn't an accident.

Arriving at Metro Church, the Texans watched further events unfold. They helped the church set up for prayer. Signs posted at busy intersections let passersby know the church was open and available.

Sensing their families would be worried, team members called home to say they were safe.

After about three hours, the group returned to lodgings on 8th Street, just before police cordoned off the area to non-residents.

"People could leave the area," Sampson said, "but only those with photo IDs proving that they lived there could enter. Had we been delayed, we likely would not have been able to return for several days to Angel House, where we were staying."

They had no interest, however, in getting any nearer to the World Trade Center area.

"We did not want to be in the way of trained rescue workers who were coming into the area by the busload," Sampson said.

The group continued to minister at the Graffiti Mission, although in a different way than they had planned.

"We were scheduled to work weekday afternoons with the Graffiti Mission's after-school program, but the schools had closed," Sampson said.

They contacted the mission's pastor and told him they still wanted to serve the mission and the people of the neighborhood, most of whom had missing relatives, friends and acquaintances.

Early Wednesday morning, they began making signs alerting people the mission had been converted to a prayer room. A poster invited people to list names of those who needed prayer. Chairs and a television were provided for those wanting to watch events unfold.

"Throughout the day, neighborhood people wrote prayer requests on the poster, prayed in the prayer room, watched TV, conversed with us and with each other in hushed voices," Sampson said.

"Witnessing was easy," he continued. "Yuppies mixed with and talked to the less affluent. Everyone wanted to talk to anyone."

That evening, the mission team assisted with the Wednesday night dinner, attended by about 40 homeless people. A prayer meeting followed.

Parkway Hills Pastor Sam Dennis and Associate Pastor Tommy Shumate left Wednesday to be with their home congregation on Sunday. But Fish and the Sampsons remained.

On Thursday, they met with missionaries from the Southern Baptist North American Mission Board and Cooperative Baptist Fellowship who told of witnessing opportunities. "I could not have been prouder of our missionaries," Sampson said.

It became apparent that a flight home was not going to be available soon, so the group rented a car for a two-day trip back to Texas.

The mission trip was one that none will forget, Sampson said.

"The ministry we went there to do was important, but when you're dealing with people in a time of crisis and they are wanting to talk, that can be a little more enduring," he said. "We didn't see any conversions, but I know we planted many, many seeds."

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-- George Henson is a staff writer for the Baptist Standard.

Scholars urge understanding in light of terrorist attacks

By John Hall

WACO, Texas (ABP) -- Americans should put aside feelings of vengeance and come to a better understanding of other cultures to move past the tragic events at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and end terrorism, authorities at Baylor University urged during a Sept. 17 forum.

Five Baylor staff members and one visiting commentator on Jewish culture, all of different religious backgrounds, comprised the panel that answered questions about the terrorist attacks from a standing-room only audience of students at the Baptist-affiliated university in Waco, Texas.

The panelists began the forum, which was sponsored by the Baylor Center for American and Jewish Studies, by talking about the personal effects the terrorist attacks had on each of them.

Todd Lake, dean of the chapel, noted the attacks have led many to a desire for vengeance. That is a feeling with which Lake said he is uneasy.

"It's a strange day as a Christian to hear other Christians say, as one young man told me, that we should 'bomb Afghanistan back into a parking lot,'" Lake said.

Though Lake said he understood the sense of outrage from the country, he encouraged those gathered to try to move past a vengeful attitude and seek justice instead. Many students have told Lake that someone must pay for these actions, he said. But his response is that Jesus paid the price for the sins of the people involved in the attacks, just as he paid for the sins of the rest of the world.

The panel members urged the audience to think past some of its presuppositions before judging the actions of other people.

"We think Judaism, Christianity and Islam are only peaceful religions," said Marc Ellis, director of the university's Center for American and Jewish Studies. "That's a mistake. Our thoughts and institutions are both good and bad."

To better understand other cultures, Americans must overcome stereotypes that are propagated through the media, added Baylor political science professor Linda Adams. While the video of Palestinian children dancing in the streets to celebrate the deaths of Americans was shown repeatedly on CNN, she pointed out, no footage was shown of the majority of the Palestinians, who mourned the loss of lives. Adams showed pictures of Palestinians doing just that, including a young child with a shirt that read "Terrorism is our common enemy."

Caleb Oladipo, assistant professor of church/state studies, compared the nation and its lack of understanding about other cultures to a one-legged runner. Although the runner may be able to get around, he never will reach full capacity to run as fast as he or she might otherwise, Oladipo said.

"The best of America is yet to come when we are trained culturally, intellectually and religiously to use both legs in understanding other cultures," he declared.

Although it may seem hard for some people to see a silver lining to the terrorist attacks, Oladipo urged Christians to maintain their faith in providence.

"It appears to me God does not will everything in human existence, but God's will comes out of everything," he said.

Plight of women held in Afghanistan complicated by terrorist attacks

By John Hall

WACO, Texas (ABP) -- As millions of Americans started to resume normal lives following events of Sept. 11, others continued to pray for the release of two Baylor University alumnae held in Afghanistan for more than six weeks.

Dayna Curry, 29, and Heather Mercer, 24, were among a group of foreign aid workers arrested Aug. 3 on charges of preaching Christianity in Afghanistan. The nation's Taliban government also arrested four Germans representing the humanitarian organization Shelter Now International and 16 Afghan Christian converts.

The Taliban, a radical Muslim sect that controls about 90 percent of Afghan territory, came under scrutiny following terrorist attacks on the United States for harboring terrorist Osama bin Laden, an exiled Saudi millionaire suspected of masterminding assaults that killed thousands in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania.

The Taliban, which has been criticized worldwide for its repression of women, forbids proselytizing among Muslims. Under Taliban law, the 16 nationals accused of converting to Christianity could face death sentences. It is unclear what penalties the foreigners could receive.

Threats of retaliation against suspected terrorists and nations that harbor them have complicated the plight of Curry and Mercer even more. Their trial has been postponed, and contact with outsiders is cut off.

American diplomats and the women's parents had visited them on several occasions, but the two women have not been heard from in the West since the Sept. 13 evacuation of most international visitors to Afghanistan. The Taliban said Sept. 25, however, that the women were safe and awaiting the arrival of their lawyer from Pakistan.

The parents last visited their daughters Sept. 12, when they delivered clothing and told them about apparent terrorist attacks in the United States.

Despite not being with the women, their parents and U.S. diplomats have continued to work for their release. On Sept. 17, Mercer's father, John, asked Taliban officials to allow him to take the place of his daughter in prison. They rejected the offer. A group of 12 U.S. veterans also has volunteered to take their place.

The women's pastor, Jimmy Seibert of Antioch Community Church -- a non-denominational church originally sponsored by Waco's Highland Baptist Church -- said he is worried the pair may be used as hostages as tensions continue to mount between the U.S. and Afghanistan. In light of their lack of representation in Afghanistan, Seibert asked all Americans to pray for the detainees.

"We want the United States people to know that it is prayer that will see them through," he said. "Jesus put it this way, 'Ask and you will receive, seek and you will find, knock and the door shall be opened.' We want to keep on asking, keep on seeking and keep on knocking until we see them home and see them face to face so we can rejoice together with them."

"We really can pray, and it really does matter," he urged. "It really does contribute to them getting delivered. In fact, because there's no practical advocacy, you really do need a guardian angel to come and show them the way out."

The women knew the perils involved with Christian work in the nation before they went, Seibert acknowledged, but the duo followed a call they felt from God to help the Afghan people.

"They put their lives in the hands of God before they left, and they will continue to do that even with the rumors that go on week to week," he said. "There's always concern, but there's trust that the Lord will see them through."

According to an Associated Press report, a Taliban official said the foreigners were caught red-handed of illegally spreading Christianity.

But the American women's mothers, in a joint interview with the New York Times, said they believe their daughters are innocent of the charges against them.

"I don't believe they were mixing humanitarian work with Christianity," Curry's mother, Nancy Cassell said.

Deborah Oddy, Mercer's mother, said she begged her daughter not to go to Afghanistan but could not stop her because she is an adult. "Heather did not try to convert people," she said. "But she would not have denied her faith, and she would have answered questions if asked about it."

Seibert said Curry had been in Afghanistan for more than two years and signed on to stay another year. He also said Mercer had worked in Afghanistan for more than five years. Curry did administrative work, and Mercer worked with children in Kabul, he said.

Seibert said Antioch Assistant Pastor Danny Mulkey is in Pakistan to serve as a link between the church and the State Department. He said the church would continue to keep a staff member in the area until the situation is resolved.

Antioch also has conducted a 24-hour prayer vigil since learning of the women's imprisonment. The church has established an Afghan Crisis Fund to help the two detainees and their families with expenses.

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