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Texas pastor accuses newspaper of racism

By Bob Allen

DALLAS (ABP) -- An African-American pastor has accused a Baptist newspaper of racism in its reporting of his attempt to get the Baptist General Convention of Texas on record as affirming the "inerrancy" of the Bible.

Officials at the Dallas-based Baptist Standard, official news journal of the BGCT, called the racism charge "ludicrous."

Dwight McKissic, pastor of Cornerstone Baptist Church in Arlington, Texas, took offense to a question about whether he was influenced to introduce his motion at a Sept. 25 meeting of the BGCT executive board by critics of the state convention hoping to create a "lose-lose" situation by forcing a debate on the inspiration of Scripture.

According to a report of the meeting published in the paper's Oct. 1 issue: "Some executive board members wondered aloud after the meeting whether McKissic's controversial motion had been originated by BGCT critics, namely leaders of the competing Southern Baptists of Texas Convention."

According to an article released Oct. 3 by Baptist Press, news service of the Southern Baptist Convention, McKissic said that question was raised because of his race.

"The roots of that question are racist," BP quoted him as saying. "I don't think they would have asked that question of Jack Graham, Mac Brunson or Ed Young," three well-known white conservative pastors of Texas churches.

"It's a question that asks 'who's thinking for you?' as if I'm not capable of thinking for myself or that I can have an independent thought process. That gives me insight into the mindset of the writer" of the Standard article, Baptist Press quoted McKissic as saying.

Leroy Fenton, chairman of the Baptist Standard's board of directors, said he has read the Baptist Standard article and has received no calls of complaint about it.

"Any such charge of racism is ludicrous, and anybody who would make that charge has no idea what they're talking about," said Fenton, who is white.

"The Baptist Standard does every possible thing we can do to be fair and inclusive. It's hardly tenable that anybody would have the gall to make such a charge," said Fenton, pastor of First Baptist Church of Waxahachie, Texas

Kyle Brown, a member of the Standard's board of directors and an African-American, said he has never found either of the paper's two editors to be racially insensitive.

"The vast majority of African-American pastors and churches in the BGCT understand that this issue is not racial but political in nature," said Brown, pastor of Victory Park Baptist Church in Rowlett, Texas.

Mark Wingfield, managing editor of the Baptist Standard and lead writer of the executive board story, said the Baptist Press story quoting McKissic -- in addition to the racism charge he also termed "ludicrous" -- contained factual errors.

The lead of the BP story describes McKissic's surprise at shouts of "No!" when he "asked the Baptist General Convention of Texas executive board to take a stand on the inerrancy of Scripture."

Wingfield confirmed that individuals shouted, but only when McKissic tried to speak after his motion was tabled, not when he proposed it, as the BP story implies. Wingfield called the BP report "not only misleading" but "a flat-out lie."

Standard Editor Marv Knox, who also covered the meeting for the newspaper, said he asked McKissic if he had discussed his motion beforehand with leaders of the SBTC, specifying three individuals by name. According to the Standard report, McKissic refused to say with whom he had discussed the matter.

"I've discussed this with people on all sides of Texas life," the Standard story quoted him as saying. "I'm not going to discuss personal conversations I've had. ... I resent the insinuation that anyone would think I was put up for this. These are my beliefs, period."

Knox defended the line of questioning as "entirely appropriate and not the least based on race."

Knox said while McKissic served on the BGCT executive board, his church voted to dually align with the Southern Baptists of Texas Convention. On top of that, sources told the paper that McKissic had recently gone on a fishing trip with three leaders of the rival state convention.

"Don't you think Baptist Standard readers deserve to know if he had discussed this divisive action with those three men whose new convention has much to gain by sowing discord within the BGCT?" Knox asked in a statement issued in response to the BP story.

Knox said action by McKissic's church to pull out of the BGCT since Sept. 25 "reveals where his loyalty resides" and that the pastor's "haste to condemn the BGCT illustrates his desire to destroy this fine convention rather than bring peace."

Knox criticized the BP story, written by the wife of an SBTC employee who didn't attend the executive board meeting. "This story, like too many before it, illustrates Baptist Press' utter lack of credibility," Knox said. "The charge of racism is slanderous in the secular context, much less as it is leveled against Christian ministers. And yet Tammi Ledbetter and the editors of Baptist Press chose to disseminate the charge without even contacting Mark or me or anyone affiliated with the Standard for a response."

Baptist Press director Will Hall did not respond to a request for comment prior to Associated Baptist Press' deadline Oct. 4.

At the Sept. 25 meeting, McKissic recommended that the executive board place on the agenda for the state convention an "addendum" to the 1963 "Baptist Faith and Message," the state convention's official faith statement. The proposed addition stated: "We believe in the divine inspiration of the whole Bible and the inerrancy of the original manuscripts."

McKissic said the amendment would unify Texas Baptists and build bridges to the Southern Baptist Convention, which tightened the faith statement's doctrines in 1998 and again in 2000.

Wesley Shotwell of Ash Creek Baptist Church of Azle, countered that inerrancy is a theologically "slippery" and divisive word that even the SBC avoided in revising the "Baptist Faith and Message."

Shotwell offered a substitute motion that the executive board "reaffirms the historic commitment to our belief in the absolute and complete trustworthiness of the Bible," and a 1999 vote endorsing the 1963 "Baptist Faith and Message."

The executive board voted to table both motions in order to "pray and seek God's face" while asking the BGCT's executive director, Charles Wade, for guidance in defining Texas Baptists' commitment to the Bible.

In the Baptist Press story, McKissic labeled "Clintonesque" the BGCT's affirmation of the Bible as "true and trustworthy" while rejecting the terms "inerrancy and infallibility."

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-- Ken Camp contributed to this story.

Baptist, Methodist debate significance of Scripture

By Tony Cartledge

WAKE FOREST, N.C. (ABP) -- The priesthood of believers is preferable to the "priestcraft" of the clergy, a Southern Baptist seminary president argued in a recent debate with a Methodist theologian.

Paige Patterson, president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, said the Bible should be accessible to all in a Sept. 25 debate with Methodist theologian Stanley Hauerwas on the seminary's campus in Wake Forest, N.C.

Time Magazine recently lauded Hauerwas, a professor at Duke Divinity School, as America's best theologian, describing him as "a very Anabaptist Methodist." His book, "Unleashing the Scriptures," provided a starting point for the debate.

Hauerwas contends that the Bible cannot be understood apart from the church and that only those who have appropriate spiritual grounding can interpret it rightly. Thus, he proposes that the Bible should not be in the hands of those who might misinterpret it, including children.

The invention of the printing press, the Reformation and the Enlightenment led to a sense of the individual in which people "assumed they could read and interpret text and in particular the Bible without spiritual guidance or moral formation," he said.

But reading the Bible apart from the church is dangerous, Hauerwas said, leading to a loss of Christian unity. Bible reading cannot be separated from the church, he added. "We must test our readings with our sisters and brothers in the church across time and across geography. No one has possession of the meaning of the text in and of itself."

Christianity is not found in knowledge or experience, Hauerwas said. "Rather, to be a Christian is to be made a member of the body of Christ through baptism, which means I am made accountable to a dangerous people. Outside the church there is no salvation."

Hauerwas said he believes the Bible is the word of God because "that is what the church has taught me to believe." But the Bible should be "put back where it belongs," he said. "That is in the hands of the church, in the hands of Christians coming to look with one another about how to read the Bible . . ."

He concluded: "For Christians our first loyalty is to the triune God and God's church across time and space. Only in that context can we confidently and prayerfully read Scripture as God's word. Otherwise it is just our opinion."

Patterson acknowledged several areas of agreement with Hauerwas, but disputed the premise stated in the preface to Hauerwas' book that the Bible should be available only "to those who have undergone the hard discipline of existing as part of God's people."

Patterson raised several points in response. Not everyone can read the Bible with the same profit, he said. Those who have more education or a deeper church background might gain more from Bible study, he said, and Bible readers should also be familiar with the writings of earlier church leaders.

Patterson said Hauerwas' thesis had no prospect of fulfillment, however, since "it is no longer conceivable to take the Bible away from the people."

Interpretation of the Bible cannot be left up to the "priestcraft," Patterson said, which "would allow the magisterium, the pope or the academy ultimately to tell us what the Bible means." That, he said, could lead to a loss of religious freedom.

Patterson acknowledged that errors in interpretation are inevitable, but the church should not be troubled by that fact. "So are there mistakes made?" he asked. "Are there heterodoxies? Are there errors in interpretation? Certainly so. Not to worry. They only point to the beauty of the accuracy and the truth of God's word."

"It is not the church itself that is the infallible teacher of God's word," Patterson said. "It is the Holy Spirit who inspired the word of God who is to be the great internal teacher. And it is that ability of the Holy Spirit to teach the one reading the book that makes it so very important that everyone have access to the word of God."

During a response, Patterson agreed with a point by Hauerwas that biblical authors might have written things with significance greater than they knew, but he denied that the original writing was without meaning. New light may break upon a text, Patterson said, but future interpretations cannot be contrary to what the author intended.

Hauerwas agreed that the people have the Bible and it cannot be taken away from them. "That is the problem," he said. "That is exactly the problem, that they have got it. And as a matter of fact, that they think they can read it just straight up without the kind of life that would ask the question, 'I would rather be wronged than take a fellow Christian to court.'"

To Patterson's critique of the "priestcraft," Hauerwas said: "Of course, you hear a tendency towards priestcraft in me. Indeed, I can't imagine the church without a priestcraft. Indeed, I say the only interesting ecclesial question left is why we are not all Roman Catholics. Only Roman Catholics have been a church, capable of being a church of the poor in this culture."

Hauerwas said the church had often failed to live up to its responsibility. "So it's not the question of whether you have the Bible or you don't have the Bible," he said. "The question is what kind of people are reading the Bible to receive its radical message."

"I do not believe in religious freedom," Hauerwas said. "I believe in the freedom of the church. And that is not the same thing as religious freedom."

The problem with American pulpits, Hauerwas said, is not a government telling us what we can and cannot say. "The problem is, the pulpit in America is self-policed by preachers who are afraid of offending their congregations."

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Conservative group promotes takeover in North Carolina

By Steve DeVane

FAYETTEVILLE, N.C. (ABP) -- Some conservatives are gearing up to try to win control of the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina.

About 40 people met Sept. 20 at Arran Lake Baptist Church in Fayetteville, N.C.. It was one of 10 meetings across the state sponsored by Conservative Carolina Baptists.

Clarence Johnson, the head of a recently formed conservative laity group, was the main speaker at the Fayetteville meeting and several of the other gatherings.

He called the controversy between conservatives and moderates "a battle for the theological stance of the pulpits of this state -- not for today, but for tomorrow."

Johnson said he spent two days with Roger Moran, a Missouri layman who has written numerous articles claiming to link Cooperative Baptist Fellowship officials and other moderate Baptists to liberal groups. Critics say Moran twists the truth and relies on guilt by association. Supporters say he is just stating the facts.

Johnson said that everybody in CBF is not a liberal, but he does not want people in CBF to lead the state convention.

"Do I want a takeover? Absolutely," he said.

Johnson said he brought back 40 pounds of material from Moran's files. He spoke against a few North Carolina Baptist organizations, including the Biblical Recorder and Gardner-Webb University's divinity school, but spent most of his time on former professors at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary and Baptists from other states.

Some of Johnson's speech focused on complaints conservatives have made before, including a controversial book written by Kirby Godsey, president of Mercer University in Macon, Ga.

Johnson also had harsh words for a historical novel he said was required reading for an Old Testament class at Gardner-Webb's School of Divinity. And he complained about the way trustees are selected at some Baptist institutions, including the Biblical Recorder.

Johnson said some institutions pick a slate of potential directors, from which the state convention's nominating committee must choose.

"Tell me why a state institution like the Biblical Recorder has a right to tell us who's going to be on their board?" he said.

Julian Mills, the chairman of the nominating committee, said the convention's constitution allows the heads of institutions and agencies to make recommendations. The committee does research but "very seldom" uses all those recommendations, he said.

"It's not a rubberstamp process as it has been labeled sometimes," Mills said.

"We try to cooperate with them as best we can," Mills said. "Sometimes, we can't."

Johnson said there are some good things in the Biblical Recorder, but he doesn't think it's fair and balanced.

"Not even close," someone in the crowd said.

"When it comes to the controversy, we don't get a fair shake," Johnson said. "I'm tired of it."

Responding later to Johnson's comment, Recorder Editor Tony Cartledge said: "We work diligently to provide balanced and objective coverage of news from all areas of Baptist life. Our coverage of this event is evidence of that effort."

Johnson said a former Recorder editor castigated him for asking the paper's staff to explain why circulation was declining. The editor accused Johnson of being a puppet of prominent conservative Mark Corts, Johnson said.

"If you think I'm a puppet, pull my string," he said. "You might find the puppet has teeth."

Johnson said conservatives should withhold money from the Recorder.

"I think it is ridiculous we're publishing a paper weekly that is losing money," he said.

Cartledge said all Baptist state papers rely heavily on funding or advertising revenue from the state conventions they serve.

"Baptist state papers, perhaps more than other institutions and agencies, provide a direct service to the state conventions," Cartledge said. "It is entirely appropriate for the convention to contribute to the considerable costs of providing the paper for its membership."

Wayne Stacy, dean of the divinity school, said he was "astonished" that Johnson would make such critical statements without contacting him first.

"How Christian is that?" Stacy asked. "We have nothing to hide here at GWU, and I would have been happy to speak with him or anyone else about the (School of Divinity) had he called me."

Stacy said Johnson doesn't know the school well enough to say what textbooks it uses. The dean said he didn't want to debate specific textbooks in the media.

North Carolina Baptists can trust the school's faculty as people who believe the Bible, Stacy said. Every faculty member signs a copy of the Scriptures as a symbol of their devotion to the Bible. The school's faculty members are "solid, evangelical scholars who are committed to the authority of the Scriptures," he said.

Johnson also complained about Cartledge speaking at a breakout session at the CBF's national meeting this summer. Johnson said Cartledge and other editors who spoke at the meeting didn't have "enough guts" to let their session be recorded like other breakout sessions.

Cartledge said he was invited to speak along with two other editors on the subject, "What do Baptists want and need to know?"

"I have spoken before many groups, and if invited, I would be happy to speak on the same or similar subjects for the CCB or any other Baptist group," Cartledge said. "In saying that I didn't 'have enough guts' to allow the session to be taped, Johnson is going far beyond the truth. Decisions about which session to tape were made by CBF, and I was never asked for permission to tape the session. If asked, I would have gladly consented. If Johnson or anyone else would like a transcript of my prepared remarks, I will freely provide them."

Cartledge noted that a Baptist Press reporter covered the session, but BP did not publish any articles about it. "There was nothing particularly eventful about the session," Cartledge said.

Johnson urged the conservative pastors to get their full slate of messengers to the annual meeting in Winston-Salem. He said they needed to stay through the vice-presidential elections on Wednesday.

"We've got to show up in force," he said. "We've got to quit whining and vote."

Johnson said the conservatives need to win all three of the convention's top elected offices to try to get control of the state convention's powerful General Board.

Johnson said moderates control most state-convention appointments.

"Since 1958, less than 100 churches have had control of over 70 percent of every committee and every nomination in the state of North Carolina," he said. "Something stinks.

"I'm telling you, it's a small club and we haven't been invited to play."

Johnson said he believes that at least 3,000 of the state's Baptist churches are conservative. Those churches should be able to get at least 5,000 messengers to the annual meeting.

"Three years in a row with 5,000 messengers and this is done," he said. "I don't want them controlling our state and what's going to be preached to my grandchildren."

Jeff Isenhour, pastor of Arran Lake Baptist Church, said conservatives are drawing a line in the sand.

"You can't make happen in North Carolina what happened on the national level unless you make some 'jugular' statements," he said. "I'm not saying we're going for the 'jugular,' but we're drawing a line."

Paul Pressler, one of the architects of the conservative movement in the Southern Baptist Convention, said at one point that conservatives would "go for the jugular" in arresting control of the SBC from moderates.