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Texas seminary pulls out as sponsor of journal

WACO, Texas (ABP) -- One Baptist seminary in Texas has pulled out of a sponsoring consortium of a theology journal and another school is considering a similar move over content that critics find offensive.

Baylor University's George W. Truett Theological Seminary announced it would cease sponsorship of the quarterly journal "Review and Expositor" after publication of an issue on sexuality. Officials said Truett's faculty found some of the content "irresponsible" and "contrary to sound theological scholarship."

Logsdon School of Theology at Hardin-Simmons University, meanwhile, has indicated it could also sever ties with the journal if an editorial board does not take steps to prevent similar problems in the future.

The reactions followed articles in the Southern Baptist Convention news service Baptist Press highlighting controversial views in the Spring 2001 journal issue, themed "Sexuality and the Church."

Most attention focused on the issue's lead article proposing an "embodiment" theology of human sexuality. Rather than viewing sexual and spiritual experience as separate, author Leslie Kendrick Townsend contended that people's experience as males and females influence their views of what it means to be human and thus shape their understanding of the nature and reality of God.

Using explicit references to contrast sexual experiences of men and women, Townsend, a pastoral counselor and family therapist in Louisville, Ky., explored male and female "embodiment" as a "source of revelation" about God.

For example, she suggested, female sexuality fosters a theology that emphasizes relationship and community, while male experience promotes themes of dominion and power that have been used in history to subjugate women.

For some, however, her linking of sexual imagery like menstruation and impotence with attributes of God went too far.

Primarily because of publication of this article, faculty of Truett Seminary in Waco voted Dec. 10 to withdraw immediately from the coalition of sponsoring schools that publishes the journal.

"The theology presented in articles in the spring 2001 issue of the journal is judged to be irresponsible and is inconsistent with the theology embraced by Truett Seminary," according to a statement released by the university. "While academic journals by their nature often include controversial viewpoints and are designed to provoke discussion, this particular issue -- which was not edited by or seen in advance by Truett faculty -- presents ideas that are contrary to sound theological scholarship."

At Hardin-Simmons, a statement released by Bill Ellis, vice president for academic affairs, said articles "are of an inappropriate nature for a Baptist journal."

"Review and Expositor's" managing editor, Nancy deClaisse-Walford of McAfee School of Theology in Atlanta, defended the decision to use Townsend's article.

"When I read the article, I thought, 'This is going to raise some eyebrows,' but one of the things I try to emphasize is that the people for whom this journal is written are pastors and leaders in churches," she said. "They should be seminary educated and should be familiar with the language and issues being talked about."

The editor of the spring issue, Dan McGee, said he didn't agree with views in the article, which he described as "radical" and "provocative."

Had he known more about embodiment theology, he said, he would have selected a more conservative writer to address the topic.

"I was convinced we need to speak to the academic world about the responsibility Christians have to reclaim our own sexuality and make it a part of our theology," he said.

"To that degree, I felt most academic people can read (Townsend's) article and say, 'That's far out, but it's what some people are writing, and that helps me know what's going on in this field of sexuality and theology.'

"This was not prepared for a Sunday school lesson and was not going to be presented at the Southern Baptist Convention or the Baptist General Convention of Texas. But it was, as I see it, a part of the dialogue between academics that includes a broad spectrum of beliefs."

McGee, who taught at Hardin-Simmons when he edited the issue, now is director of counseling and psychological services for the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

While the BGCT has no direct connection with publishing the "Review and Expositor," the state convention's top leader said the controversy could influence whether BGCT personnel are allowed to write for the journal in the future.

"The issue of sexuality and the church is worthy of thoughtful academic discussion and careful examination from a biblical standpoint, but the theological approach taken in the lead article of 'Review and Expositor' was disturbing," BGCT Executive Director Charles Wade said.

Wade said he found the article "distasteful" and lacking "a clear biblical foundation" and that BGCT leaders "certainly do not agree" with the views expressed.

"Review and Expositor" was originally published by the faculty of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky. In 1996, however, the faculty declared the journal to be independent of the seminary, and a new coalition of sponsor and patron schools was announced.

The three lead schools sponsoring the journal became McAfee School of Theology at Mercer University, Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond, Va., and Truett Seminary at Baylor. Five schools were enlisted as patron institutions: Campbell University Divinity School, Central Baptist Theological Seminary, White Divinity School of Gardner-Webb University, Logsdon School of Theology at Hardin-Simmons University and Northern Baptist Theological Seminary.

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-- By ABP staff, adapted from reporting by Mark Wingfield and Marv Knox in the Baptist Standard.

Supreme court side-steps school prayer controversy

By Robert Marus

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- School prayer received a boost in Florida but took a hit in Louisiana in recent court actions.

The U.S. Supreme Court side-stepped a school prayer controversy, leaving intact a Florida school policy that allows student-led "messages" -- which may include prayer -- at high school graduation exercises.

A federal appeals court, meanwhile, struck down a Louisiana law that judges said promotes school prayer.

The Supreme Court declined to review an 8-4 decision by the 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals that upheld a policy of the Duval County School Board in Jacksonville, Fla. The policy allows high school seniors to decide by vote whether they want one of their classmates to deliver a "brief opening and/or closing message" at commencement ceremonies.

Opponents said the policy amounted to government-sponsored prayer, which courts have ruled unconstitutional. The appeals court said, however, that the policy could stand because it doesn't specifically encourage students to pray.

The appeals court had earlier upheld the Duval policy by a 10-2 margin, but had reconsidered the case at the request of the Supreme Court. The high court ruled in 2000 that student-led prayers at the beginning of football games in Texas were unconstitutional because school officials manipulated the policy to ensure that prayers would be said at the football games.

The high court asked the 11th circuit to review the Jacksonville case in light of its decision on the Texas case.

The appeals court said the Florida case, *Adler vs. Duval County School Board*, differed from the one in Texas because prayer was not specifically listed as one of the options for students to choose.

Rick Mullaney, attorney for the Jacksonville school district, told the Florida Times-Union that the court was right to uphold the schools' policy, since it "does not advocate prayer at high school graduation ceremonies, nor does it prohibit it. It provides a level playing field."

Critics, such as Barry Lynn of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, said the policy violates the spirit of the First Amendment by allowing the predominant religion in any school's senior class to rule. "The rights of religious minorities should never be subjected to majority rule, whether it's by a graduating class or a school board," Lynn said.

Since the Supreme Court did not rule on the *Adler vs. Duval* case, the 11th Circuit's decision only applies in states over which it has jurisdiction -- Florida, Georgia and Alabama.

Meanwhile, a three-judge panel of the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals has struck down a Louisiana law that allowed for spoken prayers in public school classrooms.

Louisiana legislators in 1999 amended a state law by deleting the word "silent" from a provision that previously allowed a brief time each day for silent prayer or meditation.

Civil-liberties groups filed suit on behalf of parents, saying that the change opened the door to teacher- or principal-led school prayer, which the Supreme Court has ruled unconstitutional.

Louisiana officials said they might appeal the unanimous decision to the Supreme Court. The case is *Doe vs. Foster*.