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Baptist historian describes the 'fuss' over Calvinism

By Robert O'Brien

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- The current Baptist "fuss" over Calvinism is just that -- "a fuss, not [yet] a full blown controversy," says historian Walter Shurden, but it is likely to be around for a while.

"Some fundamentalists are Calvinists, but not all Calvinists are fundamentalists," Shurden, professor of Christianity and executive director of the Center for Baptist Studies at Mercer University, said May 17 in an address to the Virginia Baptist Historical Society.

"People read the Bible through different lenses," Shurden said in analyzing a recent resurgence among Southern Baptists of a theology that developed during the Reformation and also goes by names of "Reformed" theology and "the doctrines of grace."

Shurden said the Calvinism fuss has practical concerns, such as what kind of pastors will fill Baptist pulpits and what kind of influences will prevail on campuses of universities and seminaries. "Many Baptist young people raised on John 3:16," which says salvation through Christ is available to everyone, "are turning to strict Calvinism," he said, which emphasizes that only the "elect" can be saved.

Shurden said implications for biblical interpretation include balancing Calvinistic-cited passages (such as Romans 8:28-30; Romans 9; 1 Peter 1:1-2; and Ephesians 1:3-12) and non-Calvinistic passages (such as John 3:16, 1 Timothy 2:4 and 2 Peter 3:9.)

Considered in theological terms, "The core issue is the exercise of divine sovereignty," Shurden said. Did God use divine sovereignty to "elect" some to salvation, while passing others by? Or did God use divine sovereignty to give all people freedom to respond to the gospel?

Historically, Shurden said, a non-Calvinist approach to faith appeared first in Baptist life. Over time, Calvinism became a prominent part of the Baptist tradition, he said, but strict Calvinism has never owned the Baptist field to itself or constituted the major tradition of Baptist life.

"The vast majority of Baptists today are not strict Calvinists," Shurden said.

Streams of the history of Baptists in America -- such as the Regular or Particular Baptists, the General Baptists, and the Separate Baptists -- have deposited mixed elements in Baptist theology.

That mixture has tempered the extremes of Calvinism, but a stricter Calvinism that proponents tend to equate with "the gospel" is beginning to resurface in Baptist life, he said.

Calvinism finds its roots in John Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion and the Reformation. It underlies the doctrine in Presbyterian and Reformed churches. Calvin also influenced the early Puritans.

Shurden described John Calvin as a "great man," but said many of his followers have taken his teaching to extremes.

The tenets of strict, five-point Calvinism are often remembered by the acronym TULIP -- Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace and Perseverance of the saints.

In some extremes in Baptist history, Shurden said, Calvinism has generated an anti-missions and anti-evangelism spirit on the grounds that God has already chosen or "elected" those who will have salvation.

Citing Baptist historian Leon McBeth's assessment of Calvinism, Shurden said that a stricter Calvinism has resurfaced in recent years for several reasons. Some Baptist Calvinists see themselves rediscovering the main tradition in Baptist history, while rejecting a shallow and pragmatic evangelism. He also noted that the uncertainty of society and the consequent drive for certainty and security play into the hands of a rather dogmatic Calvinism.

"There is a heresy of 'exactness' in our society," Shurden said. "It can cause divisions among us."

The Southern Baptist Founder's Conference, an annual gathering for a loose-knit fellowship of Calvinist pastors and other church leaders, will celebrate its 20th anniversary July 16-19 at Samford University.

Articles on a Founders Ministries Web site (www.founders.org) criticize "seeker-sensitive" worship services and a doctrinal weakness in Southern Baptist churches and argue for the "sufficiency" of Scripture.

"Since the early 1970s, our denomination has seen an undeniable resurgence of interest in the theological system known as Calvinism and its attendant principles that we call the 'doctrines of grace,'" says an excerpt from a book by Ernest Reisinger and Matthew Allen included on the Web site.

"Calvinism is a much-maligned system by those who are ignorant of its teachings," they write. "In reality, Calvinism is nothing more than biblical Christianity. It lies in a profound apprehension that God is imminently majestic, holy, beautiful, and glorious, and that God's creation is profoundly sinful and needful of redemption. Hence, it promotes an attitude of dependence on God through all the activities of life. It teaches that salvation comes only when the sinful person rests in humble, self-emptying trust in the most wonderful, amazing grace of God. These are the fundamental principles of Calvinism."

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-- Bob Allen contributed to this story

Head of VA hospital chaplains receives CBF endorsement

By Bob Allen

HAMPTON, Va. (ABP) -- The first Southern Baptist ever to oversee chaplain work for Veterans Affairs hospitals nationwide has received endorsement by the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

Jeni Cook, who in 1999 became both the first Southern Baptist and the first woman to head the Department of Veterans Affairs' National Chaplain Center, is among 55 new chaplains and pastoral counselors endorsed by the Atlanta-based CBF.

The new class of pastoral counselors and chaplains -- serving in hospitals, hospices, the military, prisons, businesses and professional organizations -- brings the total of CBF endorsees to 219, topping 200 for the first time. The CBF started endorsing chaplains in 1998.

Cook, an ordained minister, had previously been endorsed as a chaplain by the Southern Baptist Convention. The North American Mission Board, which handles chaplaincy endorsements for the SBC, decided in February that it would no longer endorse women who are ordained.

NAMB officials attributed the policy change to a desire to be consistent with the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message," which limits the office of pastor to men. While the faith statement doesn't mention ordination, NAMB leaders said most Southern Baptist churches view ordination as an act reserved for senior pastors and not for church staff and other non-pastors.

Cook's office said she was unavailable for comment May 23.

A native of Enid, Okla., Cook was the first known woman ever to be ordained a Southern Baptist minister in the state. She has worked in the VA system 17 years, including 14 with the North Texas Health Care System in Dallas.

She was appointed to her current job in 1999 by Secretary Togo West and reappointed in 2001 by Secretary Anthony Principi.

The National Chaplain Center is located in Hampton, Va. The office oversees the work of more than 650 chaplains employed at VA hospitals nationwide.

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Missouri Baptist attorney shoots back at criticism

By Bob Allen

KANSAS CITY, Mo. (ABP) -- A lawyer representing the Missouri Baptist Convention responded harshly to criticism of his earlier legal opinion regarding a dispute with five convention agencies that recently adopted self-perpetuating boards of trustees.

Leaders of the Baptist Home, Windermere Baptist Conference Center, Missouri Baptist College, Missouri Baptist Foundation and Word and Way wrote an open letter April 26 disputing MBC attorney Michael Whitehead's claim that agency trustees broke the law by changing their institutions' charters without approval by the state convention.

In an 1,800-word essay recently published on Baptist2Baptist, a Web site maintained by the Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention, Whitehead said Baptist Home lawyers have argued that a Missouri statute allows the board of trustees to amend their own charter. Whitehead termed the tactic "legal magic."

He also disputed reports by the agency representatives that state convention leaders would not meet with them, attacked them in press releases and wouldn't release letters from their lawyers, labeling them "side issues."

Keep your eye on the ball," Whitehead wrote. "The charters and statutes say that the agencies cannot legally amend their charters without MBC approval."

He also shot back at criticism of his earlier opinion as "legally superficial."

"These laws are not hard to understand -- or to obey -- unless you are looking for loopholes," he said.

Attorneys for the St. Louis firm representing Word and Way, Windermere and the Baptist Home weren't available for immediate comment.

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White House leader backs 'charitable choice' expansion

By Robert Marus

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The official in charge of President Bush's "faith-based initiative" said the White House hasn't given up on efforts to expand the government's ability to give money to churches and other overtly religious charities.

Jim Towey, director of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, also countered arguments of those who oppose the practice on grounds of the separation of church and state.

The president's faith-based proposal stalled when the Senate dropped a "charitable choice" provision, which had become the legislation's most controversial component in debate on Capitol Hill.

Supporters of charitable choice say it discriminates to disallow religion-based social service programs from competing with secular agencies for taxpayer funding.

Opponents say direct support of pervasively sectarian organizations violates the First Amendment's ban on the establishment of religion.

Speaking May 21 at an event sponsored by the Heritage Foundation, however, Towey said Bush continues to support the expansion of programs that would make it easier for religious charities to qualify for federal funds.

The House version of the faith-based bill, dubbed the "Community Solutions Act," passed last year. It contained provisions for expanding charitable choice to several new government programs.

Charitable choice, first introduced to a limited number of government programs as part of welfare reform in 1996, allows government grants for social-service work to go directly to churches and other pervasively sectarian religious organizations. Previously, only secular organizations or religiously affiliated organizations that could separate their secular and religious functions were eligible for government funding. Such organizations are legally termed "non-pervasively sectarian."

Expanding such grants to other federal programs was a central part of Bush's touted faith-based initiative, but the White House reportedly agreed earlier this year to have the provision dropped from the Senate version of the bill in a compromise with Democrats.

In place of charitable choice, the Senate version -- known as the CARE (Charity, Aid, Recovery and Empowerment) Act -- offers significant tax incentives for individuals who donate to charities.

Bush announced Towey's appointment to the faith-based post shortly after the Senate compromise. Towey had not previously gone on record with his opinion on charitable choice, but he made it clear in the event sponsored by the conservative think tank that he believes expanding charitable choice is still the best-case scenario for the White House.

"I like charitable choice," Towey said. He said the House version of faith-based legislation, which includes charitable choice, is "a good bill," and added, "The president feels very strongly about this."

Towey referred to controversy that has swirled around Bush's faith-based plan from the start. "I admired the president's courage," he said. "I knew that it was going to be badly misrepresented in the media, and it was."

Towey said part of that distortion came in the form of arguments against charitable choice by groups supporting the separation of church and state. "Strict [church-state] separation ... is really only about 40 years old, when it comes to Supreme Court law," Towey said. He noted that government grants have gone to non-pervasively religious organizations, such as Catholic Charities, for years.

Towey also painted opposition to Bush's plan as political, asking why there wasn't similar criticism when then-candidate Al Gore said he supported charitable choice in 1999 or when President Clinton signed the welfare-reform bill that included charitable choice in 1996.

Church-state watchdog groups including the Baptist Joint Committee and Americans United for the Separation of Church and State did criticize Gore and Clinton at the time, but charitable choice didn't receive much media attention until Bush unveiled his plan.

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Bush defends Cuba policy amid growing opposition

By Robert Marus

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Amid growing criticism of U.S. policy toward Cuba, President Bush vowed May 20 that he wouldn't ease trade restrictions with the island nation until dictator Fidel Castro allows democratic reform.

At a speech in Miami, Bush defended the 40-year-old embargo that bars most Americans from traveling to Cuba and limits exporting of American products there. The president's comments came just days after former President Jimmy Carter called for an end to sanctions.

"Our two nations have been trapped in a destructive state of belligerence for 42 years, and it is time for us to change our relationship and the way we think and talk about each other," Carter said May 15 in an unprecedented speech televised live across Cuba. "Because the United States is the most powerful nation, we should take the first step."

The day after Carter's speech, a group of 40 members of Congress -- 20 of them Democrats and 20 Republicans -- called for an end to the travel ban and an easing of the trade restrictions between the U.S. and Cuba.

Bush responded with tough talk, however, arguing that ending the embargo would only serve to prop up Castro.

"Full normalization of relations with Cuba, diplomatic recognition, open trade, and a robust aid program will only -- only -- be possible when Cuba has a new government that is fully democratic; when the rule of law is respected; and when the human rights of all Cubans are protected," Bush told a crowd of 5,000 enthusiastic Cuban-Americans.

The stop was part of a visit Bush made to reveal minor changes in his Cuba policy and to aid his brother Jeb's campaign to be re-elected as Florida's governor.

"I want you to understand that I know what trade means with a tyrant," Bush said. "It means that we will underwrite tyranny, and we cannot let that happen. And I also want you to know I will not allow our taxpayers' money to go to enrich the Castro regime. And I'm willing to use my veto."

While criticizing U.S. policy in Cuba, Carter also referenced Castro's poor record on human rights. Carter called for Castro to allow free elections in Cuba and to end repression of freedom of speech, assembly and religion.

The Cuba embargo began under presidential order in 1962, shortly after Castro came to power. It was aimed at punishing and ultimately ousting Castro. In 1996, Congress tightened it under an act sponsored by Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.) and Rep. Dan Burton (R-Ind.) Congress eased the Helms-Burton restrictions somewhat in 2000, but the overall embargo remains in effect and is tighter than sanctions the U.S. places on Iraq and China.

Humanitarian and religious groups have criticized the embargo, calling it a failed policy that hurts Cuban citizens.

One group that has been vocal in its opposition to the Cuba embargo is the Washington-based Alliance of Baptists. Stan Hastey, the group's executive director, said the trade restrictions are particularly inhumane with regard to medical supplies.

"The simple fact is that U.S. drug companies are more innovative than any other drug companies in the world," Hastey said. "If these [pharmaceuticals] were available to Cubans, to physicians and hospitals in Cuba, lives would be saved.

"Lives are being lost every day in Cuba due to our sanctions on medicine and medical supplies."

Hastey, who returned from his most recent trip to Cuba in March, went on to describe this consequence of the embargo as "nothing short of a crime against humanity."

Hastey's March trip was his 17th to Cuba since 1993. Twenty-four Alliance congregations in the U.S. maintain partnerships with congregations in the Fraternity of Baptist Churches in Cuba, and the Alliance has a special license from the government that allows members of those American churches to visit the nation.

The recent trip included representatives from the First Baptist Church of Washington; First Baptist Church in Taylorsville, N.C.; Greenwood Forest Baptist Church in Cary, N.C. and Central Baptist Church in Newnan, Ga. It also included students and faculty from Furman University and Wake Forest Divinity School.

Hastey said that most Cuban Baptists he's met say the embargo does more harm than good. "Virtually everyone I've talked with over the course of nine years there has told me -- and this is regardless of their opinion about Fidel -- everyone agrees that to one degree or another, the U.S. sanctions hurt the Cuban people."

During his visit, Carter -- a Baptist layman -- gave his personal testimony at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Havana, one of the Cuban congregations that partners with American churches through the Alliance.

Hastey praised Carter's visit, noting his was the only presidency since the establishment of the Cuba embargo to offer the hope that U.S.-Cuba relations might be normalized.

Hastey didn't limit his critique of Cuba policy to the Bush administration, however. "I have to say that a President Gore, in my opinion, would have done no better," he said. "And Bill Clinton's policies toward Cuba were unenlightened, unimaginative. In fact, it was President Clinton who signed the Helms-Burton Act. He capitulated to Jesse Helms and Dan Burton and the hard-line Cuban-Americans."

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