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**Former SBC leader decries Islam;
current president defends him**

By Bob Allen

ST. LOUIS (ABP) -- The Southern Baptist Convention's new president is defending a former SBC leader who described the founder of Islam as a "demon-possessed pedophile" and Muslims as potential terrorists.

Jerry Vines, a past SBC president and pastor of First Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Fla., speaking at a pre-convention pastor's conference June 10 in St. Louis, blamed religious pluralism for many of America's woes.

Pluralists, he said, "would have us to believe that Islam is just as good as Christianity, but I'm here to tell you, ladies and gentlemen, that Islam is not as good as Christianity."

Christianity's founder, he continued, was born of a virgin, lived a sinless life, was crucified and rose from the dead in order that his followers might have eternal life.

In contrast, he said, Islam "was founded by Muhammed, a demon-possessed pedophile who had 12 wives -- and his last one was a 9-year-old girl."

"And I will tell you Allah is not Jehovah either," Vines said. "Jehovah's not going to turn you into a terrorist that'll try to bomb people and take the lives of thousands and thousands of people."

American Muslim leaders decried the statement and called on the SBC's newly elected president, Jack Graham, to do the same.

"It's really unfortunate that a top leader in a mainstream Christian church ... would use such hate-filled and bigoted language in describing the second-largest religion in the world, behind Christianity," Brahim Cooper, spokesman for the Council on American-Islamic Relations in Washington, told the Associated Press.

Asked about the comment at his post-election press conference, however, Graham, pastor of Prestonwood Baptist Church in Dallas, defended Vines as one of Southern Baptists' best preachers.

"I believe the statement is an accurate statement," Graham said. "Anyone who practices a faith or religion should study it carefully and know just who you are following and what you believe."

Graham said he considers all non-Christian religions to be a "works system."

"It's our desire to introduce people to God's grace," he said.

"I'm so thankful that those of us who call ourselves Christians, that we are following a pure and perfect Savior, and his love for the world is best expressed by the death on the cross and his resurrection," Graham said.

"I will not respond to his [Vines'] statement other than to say anyone who follows any path who wants to go to heaven should look carefully at who they're following and what they believe."

A Muslim leader in Vines' community said the Baptist pastor was misinformed but has a right to his opinion. Shakur Bolden, president of the Islamic Center of Northeast Florida, told the Florida Times-Union that Vines unfairly painted all Muslims as terrorists.

"We don't let the bad eggs describe our way of life," Bolden said, "just as he would not want the Ku Klux Klan or the IRA [Irish Republican Army] or other fanatic Christian organizations to define mainstream Christianity."

Vines' comments come at a time when Southern Baptists' interfaith relations are already at an all-time low. Jewish groups have recently protested announced efforts by Southern Baptists to target them for evangelism and -- along with Hindus and Muslims -- to coordinate proselytizing efforts with their faiths' holy days.

They also counter a tone set by President Bush, who enjoys wide support among the SBC's conservative leadership but has urged tolerance for American Muslims in the wake of last year's Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, presumed to have been carried out by Islamic extremists.

While Vines isn't alone among Southern Baptist leaders criticizing calls for religious tolerance post 9-11, his comments are the harshest on record to date, rivaling SBC president's Bailey Smith's controversial assertion in 1982 that "God Almighty does not hear the prayers of a Jew."

Robert Parham, executive director of the Baptist Center for Ethics, described Vines' comments as "hate speech" that opens the Christian faith to criticism.

Parham noted that many characters in the Christian Bible had moral flaws. "Just as we hope our own faith will not be disfigured by flawed biblical characters, we should avoid besmirching flawed characters in other religions," Parham wrote in a column on ethicsdaily.com. "It is simply a matter of practicing the golden rule: 'Whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them.'"

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Gay-rights protestors face felony charges

By Lacy Elwood and Bob Allen

ST. LOUIS (ABP) -- A dozen gay-rights activists faced felony charges after attempting to disrupt a session of the Southern Baptist Convention in a protest of the denomination's anti-homosexuality stance.

In all, 50 members of Soulforce, a religious organization supporting gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people, were arrested while converging on St. Louis' America's Center, the site of the 2002 SBC annual meeting.

Mel White, the group's executive director, said Soulforce members were escalating this year's protest, because SBC president James Merritt has steadfastly refused to meet with them to discuss their concerns.

"We've been writing to Merritt for three years," White said at a June 11 press conference in downtown St. Louis. "We've asked him to examine his [views] about sexual orientation, but he's refused. We've come to this convention to say to Brother Merritt that it's too important to go away."

Claiming Southern Baptist teachings have led to suffering and death for gays, about 200 Soulforce members held vigils and handed out flyers outside of area hotels before moving to the America's Center for a press conference and "civil disobedience."

St. Louis police awaited the protesters, who approached the building in groups of four and five, attempting to enter the center. The groups proceeded to kneel in vigil, as police arrested them individually, leading them to city buses for transportation to jail. SBC convention participants lined the sidewalk and windows of both stories of the building, watching the protest, as convention participants were temporarily restricted from entering or leaving the building.

Inside the convention hall, a dozen protestors rose one-by-one as Merritt began his president's address and walked toward to the speaker's platform shouting, "Hear us, Brother Merritt," before being led away by security.

The protest resulted in the arrest of 50 Soulforce members, 38 from protesters attempting to enter the building. The 12 protesters arrested inside the America's Center face felony charges of ethnic intimidation and misdemeanor charges of trespassing, said Laura Montgomery Rutt, Soulforce media director.

"The police warned us that if we tried to enter that building, they'll arrest us," White said during the press conference. "We don't come here trying to get arrested. It's not fun to be arrested; it's not fun to have our record threatened. But we're here, not having fun, because we wanted to say, 'Please, Brother Merritt, hear us.'"

Merritt made passing reference to the unfolding protest while continuing to preach his sermon, calling on Southern Baptists to mobilize against "a secular culture that is becoming increasingly strident and militant in its anti-Christian, anti-truth, anti-God mentality."

"Southern Baptists, we are in a war, and we must be faithful to the fight," Merritt said, prompting a show of support in the form of a standing ovation.

"We now face the fact that there are certain groups who protest us every year, and they have let me know in their correspondence, 'We are not going away,'" Merritt continued. "Well I've got news for the pornographer, the adulterer, the homosexual, the pedophile and the abortionist -- we are not going away either."

While many religious denominations have struggled with how to respond to homosexuality, Southern Baptists have taken a strong stand against the practice, which leaders say the Bible labels a "sin" and an "abomination."

The convention's official faith statement, the "Baptist Faith and Message," purposely excludes same-sex relationships in defining families as "persons related to one another by marriage, blood or adoption." The SBC constitution is even more explicit, banning churches that "act to affirm, approve or endorse homosexual behavior" from membership in the national body.

Merritt has turned down invitations to meet with Soulforce representatives at the SBC annual meeting for three straight years. Merritt didn't respond to this year's letter, which included an ultimatum threatening to escalate this year's protest unless he agreed to discuss homosexuality and to renounce violence against gays.

Before the protest, Merritt told messengers that convention planners had been informed that someone might try to disrupt the meeting. He said police were on hand and counseled messengers not to take matters into their own hands.

"God is not so much concerned with how they act as with how we react," Merritt said. "I want you to respond with love."

Outside the convention center in sweltering heat, SBC messengers responded to the protest with frustration at not being allowed into the building. They waited out the demonstration by singing hymns and sharing stories.

"Every American should have the right to protest," Ronald Godwin of Lynchburg, Va., said. "I'm disturbed that we can't go on with our business. It seems they're being given their right, but we're being denied ours."

Many Soulforce members said Southern Baptists do not attempt to "get to know" gay Christians. Mary Lou Wallner, a Soulforce member, said she and her husband were once in the same position. Their daughter, a lesbian and a Christian, committed suicide in 1997, after facing "nothing but rejection," Wallner said.

Two years after her death, Wallner began to research homosexuality. In October of 1999, the Wallners went to Lynchburg, Va. to tell their daughter's story to other homosexuals and Soulforce supporters.

"Even then, we hadn't changed our mind about the activity," Wallner said. "It was an amazing experience to get to meet over 200 gay Christians. We started re-reading Scripture and books, being challenged to rethink our ideas."

Soon after, the Wallners joined Soulforce. They now lead a Bible study for gay Christians and claim the majority of their friends are homosexuals. They also speak across the country, telling their daughter's story.

"It was tough because we'd been so steeped in homophobia," Wallner said of her decision to accept gay Christians. "Some of them are just the most loving people. That's where our transformation came from -- getting to know them. I would tell anybody just to get to know them. Don't make the same mistake I did."

Karen Weldin, leader of the Oklahoma Soulforce group, said she sees Southern Baptists as refusing to recognize gay Christians as people similar to themselves.

"We've become an issue, instead of human beings," Weldin said. "If they realized it was people they loved and had always loved out here, it would make a huge difference."

Several Southern Baptist Convention messengers waiting out the protest Tuesday said they disapproved of homosexuality but did not hate the individuals.

"I love them, but not their activity," Jewel Pruitt of Floyds Knobbs, Ind., said. "I would love them, share the gospel with them and welcome them into any church I was pastoring."

During his convention address, Merritt discussed how he believes homosexuals can change their sexual orientation through faith.

"We love homosexuals," Merritt said. "God loves homosexuals, but he loves them too much to leave them homosexuals."

Merritt said in recent months, he personally led two lesbians to faith in Christ who later renounced their homosexuality. "I'm telling you, Christ has the power to change anybody," he told convention messengers.

"I urge you, never condemn a blind person because he can't see," Merritt said. "These people are lost. They need Christ. But for the grace of God, it could be us."

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Missouri DOM unseats SBC registration secretary

By Bob Allen

ST. LOUIS (ABP) -- Hell didn't quite freeze over, but for the first time in 25 years, someone other than Lee Porter was elected registration secretary for the Southern Baptist Convention.

While what is commonly called the "conservative resurgence" long ago all but erased any vestige of the SBC's pre-1979 "moderate" leadership, Porter, 72, continued to defy odds by winning contested elections most years.

"I'm used to it now," Porter said of the opposition in a recent interview.

But Porter's streak came to an end June 12, when he lost to Missouri director of missions Jim Wells, a conservative, 1,839-1,222.

After the vote was announced, SBC president James Merritt, also a conservative, expressed admiration for Porter, a retired Baptist Sunday School Board staffer who lives in Lawrenceville, Ga. "I do appreciate 25 years of service Lee Porter has given to this denomination," said Merritt, pastor of First Baptist Church of Snellville, Ga.

Long before "hanging chads" entered America's political vocabulary, Southern Baptist messengers were familiar with the complexities of punch-card ballots through Porter's trademark voting instructions.

"Use ballot number three and only ballot number three," he would recite. "Any other ballot than number three will be rejected." Other specifics would follow. Remove the ballot completely. Punch "1" if you are voting for Candidate X. Punch "2" if you are voting for Candidate Y. Remove any portion of the tab hanging from the back of your ballot. Pass your ballot to the usher.

Despite such meticulous instructions, someone usually got it wrong. Announcements of election results routinely included a number of spoiled ballots because voters had used the wrong ballot or made an improper selection.

That attention for detail and setting aside of personal bias might best explain Porter's long tenure, even while another largely administrative elected post, recording secretary, went to a conservative years earlier.

While votes at the SBC haven't always gone his way, Porter said recently, "What I have tried to do is keep the election -- every vote -- totally honest."

When he first took office, Porter said it was common for members of the tellers committee, which counts votes, to leak election results on the convention floor before they were announced from the platform. In some cases, he said, reporters covering the convention knew the outcome of convention votes before the messengers who cast the ballots. One of his first acts, he said, was to put a stop to that practice.

And that applied to everyone. He said he at times clashed with convention presidents because he refused to tip them off before he announced results of a vote to the entire convention.

That's something I feel strongly about," he said. "The vote is announced to everyone at the same time."

Most other elections at the June 11-12 SBC annual meeting were more routine, with previously announced candidates being elected by acclamation. Texas pastor Jack Graham won the convention presidency without opposition. Graham, pastor of Prestonwood Baptist Church in Dallas, takes over for Merritt, who completed his term when the meeting adjourned.

Paul Pressler, a retired appeals court judge from Texas who is credited with launching the SBC's conservative movement, was unopposed for first vice president.

"All of us who call ourselves Southern Baptists owe an incalculable debt to this great Christian, to this great Christian statement," said Richard Land, president of the SBC Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, in nominating Pressler for the office.

In the lone other contested race, E.W. McCall, an African-American pastor from California, won the office of second vice president over Bob Collins, a pastor and current president of the Missouri Baptist Convention, and Louisiana pastor Ernie Don Rogers.

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Southern Baptists welcome President Bush via satellite

By Bob Allen

ST. LOUIS (ABP) -- Southern Baptist Convention messengers responded warmly to greetings via satellite from U.S. President George W. Bush June 11.

In introducing Bush, SBC president James Merritt said: "Mr. President, we want you to know Southern Baptists love you and appreciate all you are doing to lead our country. We fully stand behind you and are praying for you on a daily basis."

Messengers interrupted the president's brief remarks several times with applause. The response provided a sharp contrast with conventions while Bill Clinton was president. Though Clinton is a Southern Baptist, the convention's conservative leaders and participants often clashed with his policies on abortion and gay rights in resolutions and other actions.

In his remarks to the SBC, Bush recognized Baptists' contribution to American history as "guardians of the separation of church and state, preserving the integrity of both."

"Yet you have never believed in separating religious life from political life," Bush continued, to applause. "Baptists believe as America's founders did: that religious faith is the moral anchor of religious life."

Bush described the SBC as "a powerful voice for some of the great issues of our time." He cited a litany of "common commitments" he said he shares with Southern Baptists, including opposition to abortion and human cloning, defense of the traditional family and human rights.

He also touted his "faith-based" initiatives, which would make it easier for churches to qualify for federal funding for providing social services. "We believe that the days of discriminating against religious institutions simply because they are religious must come to an end," Bush said, again met by applause.

In the past two decades, Southern Baptists have regularly invited Republican presidents to address their annual meeting but not Democrats. Ironically, the last two Democrat presidents, Clinton and Jimmy Carter, both worship at Southern Baptist churches.

Both, however, have identified themselves as being more in line with the "moderate" SBC camp represented in the breakaway Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

Carter, once an active SBC layman who was criticized while in office for using his presidency to proselytize, renounced his ties with the denomination last year.

Clinton, a member of Immanuel Baptist Church in Little Rock, Ark., became a target of the SBC early in his administration. One year, the seating of messengers from the church met with a challenge for failure to "discipline" the president for his political views. After a hearing with convention leaders, however, the 10 messengers were eventually allowed to participate.

Southern Baptists attending this year's convention, however, clearly identified more with President Bush, a Methodist, and his social agenda.

"[The] president may be a Methodist, but he is the closest thing we've had to a Southern Baptist president in a long, long time," Merritt said.

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