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**Vines makes no apology
for remarks about Islam**

By Bob Allen

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (ABP) -- Former Southern Baptist Convention president Jerry Vines is making no apology for his controversial description of Islam's founder Muhammad as a "demon-possessed pedophile."

In a prepared statement, Vines said June 16 the comment was based on information in a book, "Unveiling Islam," and came "directly from" the Koran, the Islamic scripture, and the Hadith, another authoritative source for Muslim teaching.

"If I have misread this information, I would be glad for Muslim scholars to explain their own documents to us all," Vines said at the beginning of the 10:30 a.m. worship service at First Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Fla., where he is pastor. The service is carried live on local television, and Vines made reference both to TV viewers and media present in the service before reading the statement.

Vines had previously declined comment since giving a sermon a week earlier at the SBC pastor's conference in St. Louis, in which he said Christianity is superior to Islam. To illustrate, he compared Jesus Christ to Muhammad, describing the Islamic prophet as "a demon-possessed pedophile who had 12 wives -- and his last was a 9-year-old girl."

"And I will tell you Allah is not Jehovah either," Vines continued in the sermon. "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."

Islamic groups and others immediately protested, calling Vines' comments "bigoted" and "hateful." The Islamic Center of Northeast Florida purchased a full-page ad in the Florida Times-Union inviting Vines to meet with the organization's president to "discuss, in a spirit of brotherly love, your deeply troubling statements." Vines didn't refer to the open letter in his June 16 response.

In his statement, Vines pointed to his 20-year record in Jacksonville "as a pastor who loves people."

"I love Muslim people," he said. "I have found many of them to be kind, gentle and loving people. Our First Baptist Church reaches out to our Muslim friends through our international ministry, which ministers to people of all cultures and faiths in the community. Many Muslims have come to our church to hear of the love, joy, peace and saving grace available to all in Jesus Christ."

Prior to reading his prepared statement, Vines apologized to his congregation for making it an "interest-

"interesting week," particularly for "members who are in the political arena," who were asked to comment on statements about which they knew nothing.

Several civic leaders that attend the downtown mega church -- including a leading candidate for mayor -- defended their pastor in media interviews throughout the week.

Vines said he waited to read his public statement on Sunday morning, because, "whenever possible, I feel responsible to the people of my congregation to hear from me first."

Vines expressed appreciation for support from the church, where he celebrates his 20th anniversary as pastor this summer.

"It is an absolute honor to me to be the pastor of a group of people who really believe that Jesus spoke the truth when he said, 'I am the way and the truth and the life; no man comes to the Father but by me,'" Vines said. The congregation responded with a standing ovation.

In his formal statement, Vines said he doesn't plan to say any more about the controversy.

"I'm a busy pastor," he said. "I am responsible for the spiritual welfare of over 25,000 members. I do not have much time to attend meetings, appear on TV programs or do extensive interviews. I have no plans to speak of this matter further."

Vines said his source for the statement about Muhammad is "Unveiling Islam: An Insider's Look at Muslim Life and Belief," a book by Ergun and Emir Caner, brothers who converted to Christianity from Islam and now both teach at Christian schools.

Ergun Caner, assistant professor of theology and church history at Criswell College in Dallas, said Vines was quoting from a sermon Caner delivered at Vines' church earlier this year. According to a statement on the Web site of Kregel Publications, the book's publisher, Caner said Vines' statements were based on and supported by the Hadith, a highly respected source for Islamic teaching for Muslim clerics.

The Caner brothers say the Hadith, volume 7, book 6, numbers 64 and 65, verifies that Muhammad married a 6-year-old girl and consummated the marriage when she was 9.

They say another lengthy passage from the Hadith, volume 1, book 1, chapter 1, shows that Muhammad himself believed he was under demonic influence until his wife deemed his experiences "divine."

In "Unveiling Islam," the Caners write: "Muhammad was deathly afraid of the source of the revelation, believing at first that he was possessed by an evil spirit or jinn."

"Certainly no major prophet in the Bible attributes God's revelation to demons, as Muhammad believed that he was demon-possessed after Allah's revelation," they write.

The Caners say Muhammad's most questionable marriage was with young Aishah. They say the prophet betrothed her when she was 6 and consummated the marriage when she was 9, an act questionable even in the culture of the day. They say many Muslims "gloss over" the act.

Muslim scholars agree that Muhammad had several wives, but they disagree about the actual number and when they were solemnized. Syed Ahsani, chairman of the American Muslim Alliance, said Mohammad had nine wives, and the youngest was 18, according to the Dallas Morning News.

The Caners say people often construe their comments and writings as an attack on Islam, but their goal is to focus attention on actual statements in the Koran and Hadith.

"It's simply a matter of quoting [Islamic] sources," said Emir Caner, assistant professor of church history and Anabaptist studies at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C. "If we are wrong in our understanding of the Islamic scriptures, we would be happy to be corrected."

Jack Graham, the SBC's new president, also addressed the Vines controversy in his Sunday sermon. Graham, who told reporters in St. Louis that he thought Vines' statement on Muhammad was strong but accurate, told his congregation at Prestonwood Baptist Church in Plano, Texas, that Southern Baptists ought to focus on the main thing, according to the Dallas Morning News.

"We need to remember that our enemy is Satan, not any other religious group. We need to remember that the issue in life is not Muhammad or any other religious leader. Our issue is Jesus Christ," he said to resounding "Amen" from the congregation.

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Door-to-door proselytizing protected, Supreme Court says

By Robert Marus

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Anonymous door-to-door proselytizing is protected by the Constitution, the U.S. Supreme Court decided in a landmark First Amendment case June 17.

In an 8-1 decision, the high court ruled that communities cannot require religious groups to obtain a permit before witnessing door to door.

The justices sided with Jehovah's Witnesses, who challenged an ordinance in a small Ohio town requiring canvassers to register with the city, obtain a permit before engaging in door-to-door solicitation and produce the permit if a resident asks. Leaders of the village of Stratton, Ohio, said the ordinance was needed to protect elderly residents against harassment by solicitors and fraud by con artists going door to door.

The town's Jehovah's Witnesses refused to apply for a permit, however, saying it was tantamount to forcing them to get permission from the government before preaching to their neighbors.

"It is offensive -- not only to the values protected by the First Amendment, but to the very notion of a free society -- that in the context of everyday public discourse a citizen must first inform the government of her desire to speak to her neighbors and then obtain a permit to do so," Justice John Paul Stevens wrote in his opinion for the majority.

The Supreme Court had previously ruled that people may remain anonymous in spreading non-commercial political messages, in order to protect supporters of unpopular views from retaliation. The new ruling extends the same protection to religious speech.

Jehovah's Witnesses' religion requires them to engage in door-to-door evangelism regularly. Individual Jehovah's Witnesses and Witnesses groups have been the plaintiffs in several historic cases that have established Supreme Court case law with regard to protecting freedom of door-to-door speech.

Stratton's Witnesses filed suit against the 287-population town with the aid of lawyers from the denomination's publishing house, claiming the ordinance violated their rights to free exercise of religion, freedom of speech and freedom of the press.

The court's two most conservative justices, Antonin Scalia and Clarence Thomas, joined with the majority in the case, Watchtower Bible and Tract Society vs. Village of Stratton, Ohio, but rejected at least part of its reasoning.

Scalia and Thomas particularly disagreed with the majority's notion that some people would have religious or patriotic objections to registering with a government official for any purpose. "If our free-speech jurisprudence is to be determined by the predicted behavior of such crackpots, we are in a sorry state indeed," Scalia wrote.

The lone dissenter to the decision, Chief Justice William Rehnquist, said he believed Stratton's registration law served the state's interest in preventing crime. Burglars or other criminals will pose as canvassers in order to "case" neighborhoods and homes, he said. He referred specifically to a recent case in New Hampshire where two Dartmouth College professors were murdered in their home by teenagers posing as students conducting a door-to-door survey.

The majority opinion argued that the Stratton ordinance would likely not deter such criminals anyway. The ruling leaves standing portions of the law that limit commercial solicitation. The case now goes back to the Sixth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals for analysis on how to fashion an ordinance for the town that does not hinder anonymous political or religious speech.

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