



Associated Baptist Press

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June 21, 2002

(02-54)

IN THIS ISSUE:

- White House distances itself from anti-Muslim comments
- Former SBC missionary confesses to 'sinful acts'

SOUTHERN BAPTIST HISTORICAL
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White House distances itself from anti-Muslim comments

By Bob Allen

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- President Bush disagrees with a former Southern Baptist Convention leader's description of Islam's founder as a "demon-possessed pedophile" and linking of the Muslim faith with terrorism, according to a White House spokesman.

Speaking at the SBC pastors' conference June 10, former SBC president Jerry Vines blamed many of America's ills on pluralism.

Pluralists, Vines 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 was founded by the virgin-born Lord Jesus Christ. Islam was founded by Muhammad, a demon-possessed pedophile who had 12 wives -- and his last one was a 9-year-old girl."

"And I will tell you that 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."

The following day, at the opening session of the SBC annual meeting in St. Louis, President Bush spoke to messengers via satellite, describing Baptists' contribution to American history as being "among the earliest champions of religious tolerance and freedom."

The Washington Post reported that Bush apparently wasn't aware of Vines' remarks at the time.

Asked about the incident at a press briefing June 20, White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said: "You've heard ... the president say on numerous times that Islam is a religion of peace. And that's what the president believes."

Fleischer went on to agree with a reporter's characterization of Vines' statement as a "bigoted thing to say" and suggested his views don't represent Southern Baptists as a whole.

"I think you can go to any organization in this country, of any size, and find one individual or two individuals who will say something that is not representative of the organization," the Bush spokesman said.

Vines' comments drew immediate criticism from Muslim and interfaith groups, but several SBC leaders defended him by saying they believed his statement was accurate.

Explaining his comments to his church June 16, Vines, senior pastor of First Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Fla., said he based his statements on information from a recent book, "Unveiling Islam," written by two Christian scholars who converted from Islam.

The authors, brothers Ergun and Emir Caner, said Vines' comments were supported by the Hadith, an

authoritative source on the teachings of Islam. They said Muhammad feared he was under demonic influence when he received his revelations and that he betrothed one of his wives when she was 6 and consummated the marriage when she was 9.

A Baptist minister writing a column for the on-line newsletter EthicsDaily.com, however, drew a different conclusion.

James Browning, senior pastor of Englewood Baptist Church in Kansas City, Mo., labeled Vines' statements "more vitriolic propaganda than fact."

Browning, who has a doctorate in world religions, said Muhammad's self-critical examination of his religious calling is more reminiscent of the Hebrew prophets and Jesus than demonic. He also said multiple marriages in early Islam didn't indicate sexual perversion, pointing out that a number of biblical characters were polygamists as well.

"Critics also make much of the age of wife Aisha, daughter of Muhammad's beloved companion Abu Bakr," Browning said. "Muslim writers variously reckon her age when marrying Muhammad anywhere from 9 to 20. Great age difference was not considered a problem in marriages of the time."

Others adding their voice to criticism of Vines' remarks include Bob Edgar, general secretary of the National Council of Churches.

"Hostility and name-calling do not represent the spirit of Jesus, who always showed respect for others and treated them with grace and dignity," Edgar said in a statement. "Indeed, Jesus was far kinder to those who disagreed with his views -- even those whom his society held in contempt -- than with the self-righteous within his own religious community."

Daniel Vestal, coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, issued a statement expressing "deepest sorrow and regret" over rhetoric that "negatively affects the mission of the church to the world."

"To malign or denigrate the historic or current leaders of Islam contradicts our Christian commitment of love for all people," Vestal said. "We desire the highest good for all Muslims and grieve with you over the pain such remarks have caused."

Robert Parham, executive director of the Baptist Center for Ethics, said he was glad Bush distanced himself from Vines' remarks. "The White House would do well to disassociate itself from Christian extremists," Parham said.

Fellow SBC leaders, however, rallied to Vines' support, disputing that they were meant to be mean-spirited.

"Was this the case of demon-possession? It might well have been so," mused Phil Roberts, president of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and a former director of interfaith witness at the SBC North American Mission Board. "The end result is the same -- a false gospel and a rival revelation which millions of people wrongly believe provides them a highway to heaven."

The SBC's immediate past president, James Merritt, pastor of First Baptist Church in Snellville, Ga., observed: [T]he real substance of the controversy is not whether Vines was accurate in what he said, or whether he identified his sources. The real problem is that he would make such a statement in the day and age in which we live."

"I know Jerry Vines as a dear friend, a godly pastor and a genuine Christian who desires to see all people come to a knowledge of the truth of Jesus Christ and place their faith in him," Merritt said. "It is important to note that he certainly did not question the rights of Muslims to believe what they believe, nor would he ever by force coerce anyone else to become a Christian. He simply spoke what he felt was the truth in love."

Richard Land, president of the SBC Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission and a Bush appointee to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, told the Fort Worth Star-Telegram that he agrees with Vines that salvation is possible only through Jesus Christ but that he would have said it differently.

A spokeswoman at Vines' church has said repeatedly that he has no further comment about the controversy.

Speaking to the church June 16, Vines said: "I'm a busy pastor. 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."

-30-

Former SBC missionary confesses to 'sinful acts'

By Tony Cartledge

RALEIGH, N.C. (ABP) – A former Southern Baptist missionary fired quietly seven years ago amid charges of child sexual abuse has written a public letter confessing several incidents of "sinful acts" early in his career.

In the wake of pedophilia scandals in the Catholic Church, the Southern Baptist Convention passed a resolution June 12 calling attention to the "the sexual integrity of ministers."

Two days later, the head of Southern Baptists' International Mission Board met with former missionary children who claim first-hand knowledge of past abuse by William "Mac" McElrath, a missionary to Indonesia from 1967 to 1995. After the meeting, IMB President Jerry Rankin issued a statement acknowledging, "Our record in this area is not without blemish, and we are not immune from such problems."

Rankin's statement, released June 18 through Baptist Press, named McElrath as an example of "isolated cases of sexual abuse in the past." It cited a letter by McElrath written the previous day to members of his church, family and friends describing incidents that McElrath says happened prior to 1973.

In the letter, McElrath said none of the incidents involved sexual intercourse. "My sinful acts involved touching, tickling, cuddling, fondling that went too far," he wrote.

Rankin said that the IMB, based in Richmond, Va., now has "very strong" policies on sexual misconduct. Internal policies adopted a decade ago reflect a "zero-tolerance" on sexual offenses, Rankin said.

The news release said the missionary agency is currently "taking initiatives to provide additional counseling" to former missionary kids alleging sexual abuse.

"We are firmly committed to reaching out to victims and dealing decisively with violators," Rankin said. "We are engaged in an ongoing review of our policies regarding sexual misconduct, and we are committed to continuous training of our personnel in awareness and prevention of sexual misconduct."

A formal complaint in 1973 accused McElrath of fondling two children of missionaries. After review by field administrators, parents of the children and the McElraths, the IMB [then known as the Foreign Mission Board] determined the matter to be resolved among the concerned parties.

Following the conventional wisdom of the day, McElrath said, he followed counsel not to talk to any of the involved parties.

More than two decades later, however, a group of alleged victims came forward in January 1995 with information about other incidents they say occurred between 1967 and 1973.

After further investigation by IMB officials, McElrath reportedly admitted to the additional charges and was terminated. His wife, Betty, was allowed to take early retirement.

Since the alleged incidents had taken place more than 20 years earlier and in another country, no legal charges were filed.

McElrath said he wrote personal letters "to each person whom I thought I may have harmed, including grownup missionary children and their parents." There were 12 or 13 letters, he said, involving six missionary families. "I confessed my sin, apologized for my actions, and begged forgiveness," he said.

Some of the alleged victims and their advocates, however, accuse McElrath of downplaying both the seriousness of his offenses and the number of children involved. They say that in order to demonstrate true remorse, the former missionary should remove himself from all contact with children.

After leaving the IMB, the McElraths moved to Raleigh, N.C., and joined Forest Hills Baptist Church there. McElrath insists there has been no additional misconduct since 1973. He says he told his pastor in confidence about his termination prior to joining the church and pledged not to accept any ongoing leadership responsibilities involving children or youth.

He and his wife have accepted periodic requests "to share with children or youth at church based on our experiences in music and missions," McElrath said, but always in public settings, with other adults present.

One member of the church, however, who requested anonymity, disputed that account. She told the North Carolina Baptist newspaper Biblical Recorder that McElrath had spent unsupervised time with her children, but she was confident that nothing inappropriate took place.

In a March 21 letter to ministerial staff and lay leaders at the Raleigh church, former MK Eddy Ruble wrote "as a concerned sibling of one of his victims." Ruble said McElrath's quiet departure from the IMB has "allowed him to maintain his facade of being an upstanding member of the clergy -- simply retired."

Ruble said McElrath should not be recognized as a "former" or "retired" missionary, but publicly known as a "terminated missionary."

"I have taken it on as my cause to try to put a stop to Mac's endangerment of children by informing those in supervisory roles in places and institutions where Mac McElrath places himself in contact with children," Ruble wrote.

Leaders at the church responded by formally banning McElrath from working with children of the church in any setting, mailing a letter about the issue to all members, and arranging a dialogue session to address concerns.

Such efforts by Ruble and his wife, Cindy -- along with five alleged victims and several supporters -- also culminated in the June 14 meeting with Rankin, several top IMB officials and two lawyers. Ruble said the IMB arranged the meeting and paid the expenses for all participants, including three persons who traveled from Europe.

The delegation asked the IMB to make a public statement about McElrath's termination, provide counseling services for victims, actively seek other victims of abuse and tighten internal policies to discourage future acts of abuse.

"The only way to protect children is to break the silence," Cindy Ruble said in an interview, "to expose perpetrators at such a level that they can no longer be in a situation that could endanger children."

The Rubles said IMB officials promised to release a statement "within one or two weeks" of the meeting, after clearing it with alleged victims and their supporters. But the Rubles said the IMB statement released just days later included no input from the victims and downplayed their concerns about McElrath.

Three victims who are seeking financial restitution reportedly held a second meeting with IMB officials and legal counsel on June 14. No details of the meeting have been released.