



# Associated Baptist Press

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## Embattled Lott receives support, condemnation from Baptists

By Robert Marus

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- As incoming Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-Miss.) fights for his political life, he's receiving both support and criticism from unlikely places.

As Lott, a Southern Baptist, offered his fifth apology for public statements that seemed to support America's racially segregated past, he received heavy criticism from some of his ideological allies but support from an African-American Democrat who is a veteran of the civil-rights movement.

In a Dec. 14 radio broadcast, conservative Southern Baptist ethicist Richard Land said Lott has "an enormous and glaring blind spot in his personal understanding of just how wrong and evil segregation was and how horrific the privations were that were visited on African-Americans during that period." Land, president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, has been a close political ally of Lott's.

But another Southern Baptist, seminary professor Dave Black, took Lott to task for apologizing for his controversial Dec. 5 comments, when he said the country would have been better off if it had elected segregationist Sen. Strom Thurmond as president in 1948.

"Why isn't Trent Lott using this as an opportunity to discuss the issue of states' rights and limited constitutional government, the very platform on which Thurmond ran?" Black, who teaches at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, wrote in a column for the online publication [www.patriotist.com](http://www.patriotist.com). "Aren't those ideals still worth defending today?"

The Patriotist's website decries the presidency of Abraham Lincoln and calls the Union's role in the Civil War "an unbridled campaign of terror aimed at a group of States that had the audacity to form a government more suited to their needs than the federal empire." Black's column is also featured on his personal website at [www.daveblackonline.com](http://www.daveblackonline.com).

Meanwhile, Rep. John Lewis (D-Ga.), long known for his strong advocacy of civil-rights causes, broke ranks with the Congressional Black Caucus to say he believes Lott was sincere in his apologies and in his opposition to racism. "I believe his apology is sincere and I accept his apology," said Lewis, a Baptist, in a Dec. 17 statement.

President Bush issued Lott a stern public rebuke Dec. 12, saying Lott's comments "do not reflect the spirit of our country." While officially the White House has said Bush does not believe Lott needs to resign as

majority leader, several reputable news organizations have quoted White House sources as saying Bush would welcome Lott's ouster as helpful for a GOP trying to reach out to minority voters.

Two days later, the SBC's Land called for Lott's resignation: "To be able under any circumstances to say such a thing reveals a grossly inadequate understanding of the true injustice of that time and incomprehension of the civil-rights revolution as the most important social movement of the 20th century. Such a lack of comprehension disqualifies one from national leadership, in my opinion, in the 21st century."

Lott, meanwhile, is trying to convince colleagues and the public that he has changed his ways. In a nationally televised Dec. 16 interview on Black Entertainment Television, Lott cited his Christian faith as one of the factors that led him to question the segregationist societal norms with which he was raised. "There was a society ... that was wrong and wicked. I didn't create it, and I didn't really understand it for many years," Lott said. "I had concerns over some of the things I saw. But I didn't act on them when I should have."

However, the apologies and support may not end up saving Lott's career. Republican senators have scheduled a Jan. 6 meeting to discuss Lott's future as majority leader. Lott confidants have suggested he will resign from the Senate if he loses his leadership role.

The controversy over Lott began shortly after a 100th birthday celebration Dec. 5 for Thurmond, a South Carolina Republican who is resigning from the Senate this year. Lott said he is "proud" that his state of Mississippi voted for Thurmond in 1948, when Thurmond, a Southern Baptist, ran for president on the segregationist "Dixiecrat" ticket. If Thurmond had been elected, Lott said, America "wouldn't have had all these problems over all these years."

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## **Churches open for business with 'Christmas stores' for needy**

By John Hall

ODESSA, Texas (ABP) -- A growing number of Baptist congregations are helping needy families go shopping -- at church.

The churches operate "Christmas stores" for families who can't afford gifts for their children. Parents choose presents from shelves stocked by donations.

In Odessa, Texas, the Christmas store sponsored by First Baptist Church will provide gifts for about 85 needy families this year. Parents who register are paired with volunteers who help them pick three gifts for each child. The volunteers share a gospel message with the parents during the shopping.

In the past, First Baptist families adopted specific needy families and provided gifts, but each adopted family got a different number and children's feelings got hurt. The "store" approach ensures equal giving, explained Margaret Edwards, director of mission ministries for the West Texas church.

Enough presents are available so even the last family has a wide selection, Edwards said. Volunteers also provide families with gift-wrap, ribbon and tape.

The project is part of Mission Odessa, a social ministry of First Baptist. The mission also lets children who participate in its ongoing programs select toys. This year about 140 children will spend "Christmas dollars" earned by participating in Bible studies, helping the elderly and attending a homework club. They also are treated to a Christmas party with a puppet show and dramatization of the life of Jesus.

"For most of our kids, this is the only Christmas shopping they get to do," said Edwards.

The Christmas store also has caught on in Arkansas. Calvary Baptist Church in Benton hosted a two-day "Christmas Shop," during which needy families and individuals selected new and gently used Christmas gifts

for loved ones free of charge. In Malvern, the youth of First Baptist Church hosted a Christmas shop for the elderly. Residents of a local nursing home were given vouchers to purchase free Christmas gifts for family and friends. Church members donated the items.

Near Dallas, a suburban church and an inner-city congregation teamed up to help needy families. Cornerstone Baptist Church, an inner-city church in south Dallas, identified families and their needs. Then members of Valley Ranch Baptist Church, in the suburbs north of Dallas, found gifts for the children to choose from -- toys, sweatshirts, underwear, stockings and electronic items.

About 20 percent of the merchandise was donated by businesses and the rest was purchased with money from contributions and the church budget. The church acquires 15 percent more merchandise than is needed to ensure a selection of items for all families.

Prior to shopping with a personal assistant, parents are paired with prayer partners, who ask for prayer requests and share the gospel with them. After shopping, volunteers wrap the presents.

Almost 200 people -- mostly Valley Ranch church members -- assist in the project. The smiling faces of the children and adults make it easy for the volunteers to give their time, volunteer Biff Patton said with a broad smile.

In addition to assisting needy families, organizers say the Christmas stores help lower racial, economic and social barriers.

A church in Little Rock, Ark., has been using a variation of the Christmas store for eight decades.

In the 1920s, a boy in Second Baptist Church was in need of shoes. The church provided them. Many years later, when George Edward Dame died, his will established a charitable trust to be used by the church to purchase shoes and clothes for children at Christmastime.

Each year since 1983, the church has used the interest on that fund to take children shopping and provide needed clothing. Church families volunteer to shop at a local store with one of the selected families. Over the years, the church has spent more than \$160,000 to help 2,000 children.

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- The Arkansas Baptist Newsmagazine contributed to this story.

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