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Missionaries urge restraint in comments about Islam

By Tony Cartledge

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WAKE FOREST, N.C. (ABP) – A group of missionaries working through the International Mission Board in 10 predominantly Muslim countries are asking Baptists to exercise restraint in making negative comments about Islam and its founder, Muhammad.

George Braswell, professor of missions and world religions at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, released the letter to the Biblical Recorder, newsjournal of North Carolina Baptists. Braswell recently returned from teaching a seminar on Islam at an undisclosed location in the Middle East.

More than two dozen Southern Baptist missionaries met with Braswell. Most of them have been on the field for almost two years and hope to continue as career missionaries. They currently serve in the Middle East, North Africa, East Africa and South Asia. Because of security concerns, the missionaries were not identified by name.

Negative statements about Islam by high-profile Southern Baptists Jerry Vines, Jerry Falwell and Franklin Graham made headlines throughout the Muslim world last year. To express their concern, the missionaries jointly composed a letter and voted unanimously to affirm the letter and ask Braswell to help distribute it in Baptist circles.

The missionaries write that comments by Western Christians about Islam and Muhammad are highly publicized on local radio, television and print sources in their places of service. Such publicity increases enmity toward Christians and impacts both their work and their personal safety, the missionaries said.

"These types of comments have and can further the already heightened animosity toward Christians, more so toward evangelicals, and even more so toward Baptists," the missionaries said. "We are not sure if you are aware of the ramifications that comments that malign Islam and Muhammad have not only on the message of the gospel but also upon the lives of our families as we are living in the midst of already tense times."

The missionaries said they have found it more beneficial to focus on sharing Christ in love and concentrating on the message of the gospel with their Muslim friends, rather than speaking in a degrading manner about their religion or prophet. They appeal to other Baptists to do the same.

"We prayerfully ask you, as brothers and sisters in the Lord Jesus Christ, to focus public comments about Muslims on their need for salvation that is found only by faith in Jesus Christ. We encourage you to make comments and to live your lives in a way that will contribute positively toward the preaching of the gospel in the lives of over a billion people who hold the religion of Islam and its prophet dearly."

Calling upon the example of Christ, the missionaries conclude, "We encourage you all to reach out to the people of Islam in love and in a fashion that is consistent with the life of our Lord Jesus Christ."

The letter is signed "A Group of Southern Baptists serving in the Muslim World."

A statement by Avery Willis, senior vice president of overseas operations for the International Mission Board, did not criticize the missionaries' comments.

"These IMB workers wanted to emphasize a focus on bearing witness for Christ as a blessing to Muslims, rather than arguing Islam versus Christianity," Willis, who oversees the missionaries, told Associated Baptist Press. "I believe what they were trying to say is that their concern is communicating the gospel to lost persons without having to defend what someone in America said about Islam."

Christians debate morality of Bush tax-cut proposal

By Robert Marus

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WASHINGTON (ABP) – Does President Bush’s tax-cut proposal square with Christian obligations to do justice and care for the poor? That depends on which Christian you ask.

While some public-policy advocates hail the tax plan as “pro-family,” others condemn it as being at odds with the fundamental message of the gospel. The proposal would cost an estimated \$674 billion over the next 10 years.

“The tax plan the president is advocating would be a substantial and much-needed financial boost for married couples, parents and senior citizens,” said Ken Connor, president of the Family Research Council, a conservative Christian public-policy group.

But Tony Campolo, a Baptist social-justice advocate, disagreed. “All policies, from my point of view, are judged in terms of how I think Jesus would view them, and I think the first obligation of government is to protect the weakest people in a society – and that’s the poor,” said Campolo, emeritus professor of sociology at Eastern University in suburban Philadelphia. “I don’t think that ending tax penalties toward stockholders helps that.”

The bulk of Bush’s proposal would come from eliminating the tax that investors pay when the company in which they own stock distributes dividends. Since 85 percent of stocks are held by those in the top 10 percent of America’s income spectrum, critics accuse Bush’s tax cut of being fundamentally unfair.

According to Citizens for Tax Justice, a progressive taxation-advocacy group, the bottom 60 percent of American taxpayers – those making less than \$46,000 a year – would pay an average of \$131 less in annual taxes under Bush’s plan. Meanwhile, the top 10 percent (earning \$104,000 a year or more) would see an average savings of \$5,578. And for those whose incomes are \$374,000 a year or more – the top 1 percent of Americans – the average savings jumps to \$30,127.

But since that top 10 percent of Americans pay the majority of income taxes, the White House argues, they deserve to get a larger portion of any tax cut.

Bush says that eliminating taxes on stock dividends is fundamentally fair because now those dividends are “double taxed,” since corporate profits are subject to corporate income tax. “It’s not fair to double-tax by taxing the shareholder on the same profits,” Bush said in Jan. 7 speech announcing his proposal.

Phillip De Vos, public-policy manager for the Michigan-based Acton Institute, agreed: “Double taxation is wrong and a violation of justice. It is only right that any economic growth plan address this important issue.” The Acton Institute is a Christian think tank that promotes free-market economic policies.

However, nearly half of American corporate income is not taxed, according to the editors of *The New Republic*, because of the increasing number of loopholes in corporate income-tax law, which the Bush White House defends.

Connor of the Family Research Council said Bush’s proposal “will greatly reduce the current tax burdens saddling America’s families.” In a press release, the group pointed out that, under Bush’s proposal, “more than 30 million families with children will receive an average tax cut of more than \$1,400.”

Connor also praised Bush’s proposal to accelerate the elimination of the so-called “marriage penalty.” Because of that, he said, “married couples will receive a tax cut of more than \$1,700 [apiece].”

But those figures are averages and don’t accurately reflect the effects of Bush’s proposal on the working-class families who need economic help the most, countered Yonce Shelton of Call to Renewal, a progressive Christian public-policy group. “When you talk about average benefits for families and how numbers come down, that’s sort of misleading at times, because you throw one person in there with a fairly high income and it skews the average,” said

Shelton, the group's director of public policy. "Average can look a lot better than what's typical."

Shelton said Bush's plan passed up opportunities to accelerate already-proposed tax credits for child-care and a reduction of the "marriage penalty" in ways that could actually benefit lower-income workers.

Bush's plan is nonetheless pro-family, said the Acton Institute's De Vous. "The marriage penalty, which hits low-income workers hardest and serves as a financial obstacle discouraging marriage, will be reduced now, instead of waiting until 2009," he said. "This reduction, combined with an increase in the child tax credit, from \$600 to \$1,000 this year, makes clear that this administration understands that stable marriages and family life serve as a foundational principle in wealth creation, and as such, ought not to be disincentivized by the tax code."

Both Shelton and Campolo argue that Bush's plan does little to stimulate the economy in the short term because wealthier individuals are more likely to save or invest any extra money, while lower-income individuals tend to spend extra money immediately on consumer goods. "Putting money into the pockets of lower-income workers, that's money that's going to go right back into the economy," Shelton said.

But Bush and his aides say the plan is geared for the long-term health of the economy. Cutting dividends would help jump-start a sagging stock market, and recent years of experience on Wall Street have suggested that a growing stock market tends to lift the entire economy along with it.

For Bush and other Christian defenders of large tax cuts, it constitutes "class warfare" to pit wealthy taxpayers against low-income taxpayers in battles over which group gets more benefits out of proposed tax cuts. "It's class warfare to say that there are wrong people in America and these wrong people are not deserving of tax relief," said White House spokesman Ari Fleischer in response to a reporter's Jan. 9 question about the tax plan's heavy tilt toward cuts for wealthy taxpayers.

But Call to Renewal's Shelton said Christians shouldn't be scared away by talk of class warfare. "How do you get around the fact that the overwhelming amount of the benefits [of Bush's plan] go to the upper income groups, and it passes up opportunities to help the lower-income?" he asked. "The Scriptures are filled with passages about the poor and the peril of the powerful and rich.... The Bible is very clear on the need to help the poor, be among the poor, and work with the poor to better their lot in life."

"Pro-growth does not mean anti-poor," countered De Vous of the Acton Institute. "Quite the opposite is true. If one understands that growing the size of the economy is the best way to create jobs and raise standards of living, then it is clear the pro-growth agenda has much to offer low-income workers."

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Enron offers spiritual lessons in greed, prosperity, author says**By Mark Wingfield****Associated Baptist Press - www.abpnews.com****January 14, 2003****Volume: 03-03-3405**

HOUSTON (ABP) – Enron became the "poster child for a capitalism run amok," according to Houston pastor and author Chris Seay.

And that should be a warning to Americans, including Christians, about the road they too are following, Seay writes in his new book, "The Tao of Enron: Spiritual Lessons from a Fortune 500 Fallout."

"When affluence and material prosperity become our all-consuming goal, greed takes the wheel and drives the whole speeding convoy over a cliff," he surmises.

The book features a rare interview with former Enron CEO and President Kenneth Lay as well as insight from whistleblower Sherron Watkins. With help from contributing author Chris Bryan, a former Enron VP, Seay paints a picture of the corporate culture that led Enron to the height of envy and the depth of shame. Seay offers prophetic warnings from Scripture about morality, integrity and greed.

Seay is pastor of Ecclesia, an innovative congregation that combines art, music and film in its expressions of worship and study. He was founding pastor of University Baptist Church in Waco and is a frequent conference speaker.

Bryan, interim administrator for Baptist Mission Centers in Houston, is a Truett Seminary graduate who previously was vice president of administration and human resources for Enron Oil and Gas Co.

Seay knew he had to write the book, he said, after witnessing a bizarre encounter at his neighborhood gas station in Houston that illustrated the fallout from Enron's demise.

A homeless man who frequently solicits money from drivers of luxury cars at the gas station one day approached a solemn man wearing a luxury suit. Seay heard the well-dressed man berate the beggar: "You want to take something from me? They have already taken everything. I have nothing left. Soon they will take my car. So back the hell up!"

What Seay noticed about his hometown was that "everybody was flippin' out around here." In this moment, the pastor saw an opportunity to connect the spiritual and cultural landscape into one portrait.

He also was fascinated because Lay, like Seay, had grown up the son of a Baptist pastor. "I wondered, 'What's gone awry here that the son of a Baptist pastor has come to be in this place, is at the center of this scandal?'"

Seay spent about two months interviewing sources for the book and met several times with Lay, also a member of a Baptist church. He then wrote the manuscript in about two months in order to get the book to market in a timely fashion.

Alternating between a feature interview style and sermonizing, Seay repeatedly draws spiritual lessons from Enron's rubble.

"The catastrophe of Enron shows that it is past time for America to examine the motives behind its unyielding quest for wealth," he writes. "Our frenzy to accumulate money and power harms not only the poor of America and the rest of the world's underprivileged, but also the very ones who get trapped in a never-ending thirst for more."

"The ultimate lesson of Enron," he concludes, "is this: Wealth can never satisfy."

While not condemning Lay as an intentional perpetrator of evil, Seay does ponder the contrast between what Enron became and the public face of Christian piety Lay wore.

"It doesn't take a master theologian to notice the obvious disconnect between the massive harm inflicted on others for selfish gain and the serve-others-first message of Christ. ... Can anyone live a genuine faith without that faith guiding and coloring everything one does, including one's activities in the business world?"

In critiquing the so-called "rank and yank" system of cut-throat personnel evaluation employed at Enron, Seay finds a culture that breeds untruth as a means of survival.

The irony, he adds, is that "integrity" was listed as one of Enron's four core beliefs.

"A select group of Enron executives embraced a philosophy so far from traditional ethics that they ended up adopting a lifestyle completely contrary to their company's stated beliefs on integrity," Seay writes.

But he adds that all humans "have a frightening ability to declare our belief in one thing while simultaneously acting in a manner 180 degrees in opposition to it."

He quotes a longtime friend and coworker of Lay describing Lay's own faith as "schizophrenic."

"Take heed, lest we share the same indictment," Seay warns the reader. "At Enron, many workers found their Monday selves in desperate conflict with the selves they had taken to church only a day before. In fact, the culture at Enron encouraged many employees to leave their moral compasses at the front security desk and embrace 'the Enron way.'"

Seay's harshest critiques fall not on Lay, however, but on top executives Jeff Skilling, Rebecca Mark and Andrew Fawstow, as well as the Enron board of directors.

Inside the shady business deals and alleged bookkeeping irregularities at Enron, Seay finds lessons not only on the dangers of greed but of impatience.

"Many of the top executives at Enron serve as poster children for impatience -- and not only because they heard the siren call of big money," he writes. "With Enron's live-for-today accounting, they really felt as though if they didn't cash in right away, it would be too late."

The problem, he concludes, is that "when impatience ascends the throne, integrity goes into exile."

In Sherron Watkins, former Enron vice president for corporate development, Seay finds a rare example of courage and integrity stirred by Christian faith. "Sherron Watkins' behavior -- her acted-out faith -- represents a refreshing change from today's widespread corporate culture of greed and irresponsibility," he concludes.

Seay encourages Christians to live more like Watkins and less like other Enron executives and executive-wannabes.

"Until we Americans re-envision the role of business and wealth, we are doomed to repeat a series of disasters like what happened at Enron," he concludes.

"And the fallout for most of us will not come in the form of the collapse of the seventh-largest company in the United States of America. It will take shape in the collapse of marriages, families and communities, and the suffering of children and other helpless victims across the planet -- all because of our selfish choices."

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Texas Baptist group endorses moratorium on death penalty

By Ken Camp

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DALLAS (ABP) – The Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission has joined the call for a moratorium on the death penalty.

The commission, which is the moral-concerns and public-policy agency of the 4 million-member Baptist General Convention of Texas, also agreed to support legislation that would allow Texas juries to choose life without parole as an alternative to the death penalty.

Since 1976, Texas has carried out about one third of the executions in the United States. Last year, 33 of the 71 executions in the country were performed in Texas.

The agency approved an extensive report examining capital punishment from biblical, historical and social-justice perspectives. The report concludes "in the final analysis, biblical teaching does not support capital punishment as it is practiced in contemporary society."

"The practice of capital punishment in our nation and state is an affront to biblical justice, both in terms of its impact on the marginalized in society and in terms of simple fairness. How can we perpetuate a system which is clearly so unfair and so broken?"

The way Texas applies the death penalty is unjust in terms of its impact on racial minorities, the poor, juvenile offenders and inmates who mistakenly are convicted, according to the report.

A Texan who murders a white person is five times more likely to be sentenced to death than a Texan who murders an African-American, according to the commission's study. And white Texans rarely receive the death penalty for killing black people.

"Statistically, race is more likely to affect death sentencing than smoking affects the likelihood of dying from heart disease," the report states.

The report also notes the United States is the only Western democracy currently using the death penalty. Globally, the United States ranks third in the total number of executions since 1998, behind China and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.



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Supreme Court declines case over Columbine memorial tiles**By Robert Marus****Associated Baptist Press - www.abpnews.com****January 14, 2003****Volume: 03-03-3409**

WASHINGTON (ABP) – The Supreme Court has declined to hear a thorny First Amendment case that pitted two groups of survivors of the Columbine High School shooting against each other.

On Jan. 13, the high court denied, without comment, an appeal from the families of two of the victims of the 1999 shootings. In that incident, two disgruntled students shot their classmates, leaving 26 injured and 15 dead, including the gunmen.

The families of shooting victims Daniel Rohrbough and Kelly Fleming had asked the court to overturn an earlier decision against them by the 10th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals. They had sued the Jefferson County [Colo.] School District for the right to include Christian messages on special decorative tiles that they had been asked to paint.

The tiles – designed by Columbine students, by rescue workers who were called to the scene of the shooting, and by families of the shooting victims – were to be installed in the hallways of the school.

School officials asked those painting the tiles not to include religious imagery, references to the attack or its date, names of victims, or anything “obscene or offensive” on the tiles. The plaintiffs objected to the rules, and after consultation with teachers overseeing the tile painting, were allowed to paint tiles with messages such as “Jesus Christ is Lord,” “4/20/99 Jesus Wept,” and “There is no peace, says the Lord, for the wicked,” according to court documents.

The plaintiffs were informed that their tiles would not be affixed to the walls along with the other tiles because they violated the rules. However, some of the plaintiffs’ tiles slipped past two more screening processes to remove offending tiles and ended up being placed on the walls.

Approximately 80 of the 2100 tiles that had been installed were later removed, including some of the plaintiffs’ tiles. Other tiles that were removed contained imagery such as the anarchy symbol, a human head dripping with blood, angels, a Star of David, and gang graffiti.

The plaintiffs then sued.

A lower federal court ruled that school officials had created a “limited public forum” by allowing community members to participate in the tile creation, and thus were bound by Supreme Court precedent to allow any sorts of reasonable expression, including religious expression.

However, the school district appealed to the 10th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, which reversed the lower court’s decision. Judge David Ebel, writing the opinion of the three-judge panel, found that school officials had instead created a nonpublic forum that was school-facilitated and school-sponsored, and in which the school had a compelling interest to control the kinds of speech allowed. Therefore, the school could choose to disallow certain kinds of expression, including religious expression.

School officials had worried that religious expressions enshrined on the school’s walls would prove controversial among students, as well as leave the school vulnerable to attack for violating the Constitution’s ban on government support for religious messages. Ebel agreed. “The tiles at issue in this case will become a lasting part of the school,” he wrote. “The presence of permanently affixed tiles on the walls implicates the school’s approval of those tiles.”

The plaintiffs had argued that the school should not be allowed to discriminate on the basis of “viewpoint” in the kinds of speech allowed on the memorial tiles. However, Ebel said that following such a rule could create all kinds of other problems for the school district. “If the District were required to be viewpoint neutral in this matter, the District would be required to post tiles with inflammatory and divisive statements, such as ‘God is Hate,’ once it allows tiles that say ‘God is Love,’” Ebel said. “When posed with such a choice, schools may very well elect to not sponsor speech at all,

thereby limiting speech instead of increasing it.”

Plaintiff Donald Fleming was unimpressed by the Supreme Court’s refusal to reverse the 10th Circuit decision. “The school district apparently believes in freedom from religion instead of freedom of religion,” Fleming told the Denver Post. “To me, the [school] district has some strange values. But the court appears to have the same values.”

School district officials had mixed feelings even as they welcomed the decision. “It has never been easy to be in opposition with families of the victims,” Jefferson County School District spokesman Rick Kaufman said, as reported in the Post. “They have suffered tremendously, not only through the tragedy but the aftermath. Litigation, unfortunately, forces communities to pick sides.”

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News Briefs from ABP
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Morgan named vice president at Samford

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. — Veteran Baptist fundraiser and educator Michael Morgan has been hired as vice president for university relations at Samford University, overseeing fundraising and communications for the Baptist university.

Morgan was development director for the Baptist Standard, newsjournal of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, since 2001. Previously he was assistant dean at George W. Truett Theological Seminary in Waco, Texas, and on the staffs of the Southern Baptist Annuity Board and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

"Dr. Morgan brings strong organizational planning skills to [Samford]," said President Thomas Corts. "As Samford seeks to energize its commitment to alumni, to donors and to the community, his talents will help us sharpen our information-gathering and sharing resources. He understands the distinctive mission of Samford."

Morgan, who assumed the new post Jan. 1, is a graduate of Baylor University, Southwestern Seminary and the University of North Texas. (ABP)

Historic Memphis church selling facilities

MEMPHIS, Tenn. — After months trying to find another church to share the cost of its space, historic Prescott Memorial Baptist Church in Memphis has decided to sell all or part of its church building.

No decision has been made on whether the church will relocate.

Founded in 1916, Prescott Memorial is best known for its progressive social-justice views. In the 1980s, it became the first Southern Baptist church in the mid-South to call a woman as pastor. Located across from the University of Memphis, Prescott accepted its first black university student as a member in 1968. It was the first Baptist church in the state to ordain women as deacons and ministers.

Church membership peaked at about 1,700 in the 1950s. About 100 attend now. Over the past three decades, the church has shared its buildings with many not-for-profit organizations. Eight agencies currently pay a nominal amount to cover a portion of the utilities. Current pastor Martha Brahm admitted the church's generosity in housing a number of agencies over the years may not have been a financially savvy move. "We haven't charged enough to set money aside for capital improvements," she said. "The fees charged were mainly just to help pay the utilities."

But she has no regrets: "Our job is not just to sustain a building. It is to spread the good news of love, compassion and justice." (ABP)

Alma Hunt changes churches

ROANOKE, Va.—When First Baptist Church of Roanoke voted to join the Southern Baptist Conservatives of Virginia, 93-year-old Alma Hunt voted to leave it.

"I didn't leave my church; it left me," said the legendary Southern Baptist missions leader, who "was born into the cradle roll of First Baptist Church in 1909."

The church voted Jan. 8 to leave the Baptist General Association of Virginia and join the SBCV. The SBCV split from the BGAV in 1996.

Hunt joined Rosalind Hills Baptist Church in Roanoke the following Sunday, Jan.12. Rosalind Hills church is affiliated

with the BGAV and allows its members to choose a giving plan for their contributions that could include the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, the Southern Baptist Convention or both.

"I do not believe that the Southern Baptist Conservatives of Virginia reflect traditional Baptist heritage and principles," said Hunt, who served as executive secretary of the SBC Woman's Missionary Union, 1948-74, and returned to Roanoke and First Baptist Church in 1985.

"I feel sorry for the people of the First Baptist Church who don't realize the changes that have taken place in Southern Baptist life," she said. "It is no longer the church that nurtured me, and I had to find a place where I could be a full-fledged member and support causes dear to my heart."

Hunt said the vote to join the SBCV, not Pastor James Austin, caused her to make the change. Austin succeeded Charles Fuller, long-time pastor and chairman of the former SBC Peace Committee. (ABP)

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