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SBC set to withdraw from BWA; issues charge of 'aberrant theology'

By Greg Warner and Trennis Henderson

NASHVILLE (ABP) -- A study committee is recommending that the Southern Baptist Convention withdraw its membership and funding from the Baptist World Alliance, the worldwide fellowship of 43 million Baptists, in order to create a more conservative international body.

BWA General Secretary Denton Lotz, who labeled the proposal "a sin against love," warned that the recommendation "will bring a schism within the life of our worldwide Baptist family."

"The Scripture commands us to love one another," Lotz declared. "Schism is a sin against that unity which is necessary for evangelism."

Southern Baptist leaders, who directed a successful two-decade campaign to root out "liberalism" within the SBC, have been less successful advancing their conservative cause within BWA. A proposal drafted by a special study committee accuses BWA of "advocating aberrant and dangerous theologies" and refusing to hear Southern Baptist objections.

The proposal to withdraw accuses BWA of questioning biblical inerrancy, promoting women as pastors, and downplaying the doctrine of salvation only through Jesus.

"Continuing to allow presentations that call into question the truthfulness of Holy Scripture, refusing to support openly the idea that all who are saved must come to the salvation through conscious faith in Jesus Christ, and promoting women as preachers and pastors are among the issues that make it impossible to endorse the BWA as a genuinely representative organization of world Baptists," said the report of the BWA Study Committee released Dec. 19.

"The BWA rejects categorically this false accusation of liberalism," Lotz responded. "Of course there is a spectrum of theological thought in all of our conventions, just as in local churches, but we belong to one another because we belong to Christ."

"Every pastor and every deacon knows that nobody in their church agrees on everything," Lotz told Associated Baptist Press. "The main orthodox beliefs are crucial -- the Trinity, the divinity of Christ, the cross, the resurrection, the Second Coming -- that's who we are as Baptists."

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Noting that current Southern Baptist leaders are not united on such issues as Calvinism vs. Arminianism, Lotz asked, "Who is aberrant in theology there?"

"The BWA does not have a liberal agenda, but we pray that we have a biblical agenda of following in the footsteps of Christ to win the world to His leadership and rule," he said. "We have rejected the theology of liberalism."

The study committee is recommending that the SBC withdraw its membership and financial support from BWA as of Oct. 1, 2004. The deleted funds would be used "to develop and execute a new and innovative strategy for continuing to build strong relationships with conservative evangelical Christians around the world as together we witness to the saving power of our Lord Jesus Christ," the report says.

The statement adds that some of the more conservative Baptist bodies around the world have already expressed interest in the new SBC-led organization, raising the possibility of two competing worldwide organizations of Baptists.

Until recently, the Southern Baptist Convention provided \$425,000 a year to BWA. The SBC voted in June to cut that contribution by \$125,000 this year. If the new plan is approved, the remaining \$300,000 would be cut next year.

Southern Baptists, who were instrumental in founding BWA in 1905 and have always been its largest member, also provide the lion's share of the organization's budget, which this year totaled \$1.69 million. The BWA cut its budget dramatically this year in response to the SBC's partial defunding.

Citing the report's claim that the BWA "seems poised to become 'a super-denomination,' Lotz said, "I have never heard that in all my life. We emphasize so much the autonomy of the local church and of the national conventions. We are biblical and do believe we are bound together because we're bound to Christ."

The study committee's report will be presented to the SBC Executive Committee in February and, if approved, to Southern Baptist Convention messengers next June.

The study committee's members include leaders who have been prominent in the conservative shift in the denomination, including four former SBC presidents. They are: Morris Chapman, committee chairman, president of the SBC Executive Committee; James Draper, president of Lifeway; Oklahoma pastor Tom Elliff; and Paige Patterson, president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, as well as retired Houston judge Paul Pressler; Jerry Rankin, president of the International Mission Board; Joe Reynolds; Gary Smith; and Bob Sorrell.

The group's statement adds: "If every issue about which highly objectionable theologies are advocated were to be openly discussed with equal time provided for more Biblical positions, and if a less Byzantine form of governing the fellowship could be developed, then Southern Baptists might feel more comfortable. Though repeated attempts to secure a just forum have been made by ecclesiastical statesmen such as Jimmy Draper, Morris Chapman, and a host of others, the situation has only worsened.

"In conclusion, the committee wishes no one any harm. Our fervent hope is that the exodus of Southern Baptists from the BWA will galvanize other member bodies scrupulously to examine and to correct the present trajectory of the BWA. Whatever the case, we wish Heaven's blessings on the BWA and its constituent conventions in every noble work for the Savior."

"I don't worry about the future of the Baptist World Alliance because our future is as bright as the promises of Christ," Lotz responded. "We worry more about the unity of the Baptist witness in the United States. Baptists of the world want a positive light of who we are around the world."

BWA's Lotz labels SBC proposal 'triumph of ideology over doctrine'

By Trennis Henderson

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A Southern Baptist proposal to end a 99-year-relationship with the Baptist World Alliance is a "triumph of ideology over doctrine," according to BWA General Secretary Denton Lotz.

"SBC doctrine is a call to unity among its churches," Lotz said. "Why then separate from the world of Baptists? In the end, it became a question of power and control and the desire of forcing Baptists of the world to fit into one particular mode or mold or interpretation of thinking. This is contrary to all Baptist understanding of the competency of the individual and of soul liberty!"

Lotz also questioned the study committee's claim that SBC leaders have failed to "secure a just forum" to air their concerns.

Noting that study committee members Morris Chapman, James Draper, Paul Presser and other Southern Baptist representatives have key leadership positions in BWA, Lotz said, "If you go through our members who chair key committees, I am questioned (by other BWA members) for having too many Southern Baptists in leadership positions.

"We're family," Lotz insisted. "You can't have your way all the time. ... We don't have a lockstep-like mentality where everyone has to repeat the same thing" about issues being discussed or debated.

Responding to the committee's charge of liberalism, Lotz said, "Of course, the BWA rejects categorically this false accusation of liberalism. It is sad that in the 21st century we use loaded terms to end discussion and to eliminate the thoughts and hearts of other people. It is a form of McCarthyism.

"Since the conservative resurgence (in 1979), BWA leadership has bent over backwards to accommodate the concerns of the present Southern Baptist leadership, but alas now to no avail." Looking to the future, Lotz said, "We, of course, will be very sad if indeed the Southern Baptist Convention in June withdraws from the Baptist World Alliance. I think it will be bad for the SBC and will further isolate their missions work overseas.

"I think it will make it more difficult for Southern Baptist missionaries," he added. "How will they relate to national conventions that are members of the Baptist World Alliance?"

"Personally, I fear for the Southern Baptist Convention," Lotz said, "because this decision follows in a long line of other decisions that, I believe, will ultimately lead to the dissolution and self-destruction of the SBC."

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CORRECTION:

Please make the following correction in the 4th paragraph of the story "Stacy expected to leave Gardner-Webb divinity school for Jacksonville pulpit" in Dec. 18 ABP:

Stacy is serving as interim pastor of First Baptist Church, Gastonia, N.C., not First Baptist, Greensboro, as reported.

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