



REPORT from the CAPITAL

Volume 50, Number 8

April 18, 1995

NEWSMAKERS

House Speaker Newt Gingrich, R-Ga., said April 9 that tinkering with the Constitution to allow public school prayer may not be necessary, according to a news report. Gingrich said on "Face the Nation" that a statute rather than a constitutional amendment was needed. Following the November elections that gave the GOP control of Congress for the first time in decades, Gingrich vowed a vote on a constitutional prayer amendment before July 4. But his recent comments have some observers speculating about the future of such a measure.

Jeb Bush, son of former president George Bush, who made an unsuccessful bid for Florida governor, recently said he has reversed his stance on public school prayer. While espousing conservative views, Bush said, "I don't trust the government to create a prayer that does justice to the powerful nature of prayer. That should be done at home or through voluntary groups." He made the comments at an interfaith conference in Boca Raton, Fla., focusing on "A Shared Vision," a statement signed by nearly 100 religious leaders and organizations. Bush called for toleration and a creative process toward a shared vision, rather than divisive rhetoric on such contentious issues. Among the other participants were two of the statement signers, Baptist Joint Committee Executive Director James M. Dunn and Rabbi A. James Rudin of the American Jewish Committee. Dunn said that he was pleased Bush changed his position on school prayer, but Dunn disagrees with his continued support for vouchers. Rudin told the crowd that church-state relations is the single most important domestic issue of the 1990s. Rudin and Dunn lauded the ideals embodied in the statement. Δ

Groups address law on student religious activity

The nation's high court has declared public schools religion-free zones in such a murky manner that officials cannot possibly discern what is and is not legally permissible, right?

Not according to 35 religious and civil liberties groups that are emersed in constitutional law on a daily basis. The groups released April 13 a consensus statement on what the law says about religion in public schools—even though they do not all agree with its application.

The statement is designed "as an aid to parents, educators and students" who may not understand this area of constitutional law, they said.

J. Brent Walker, Baptist Joint Committee general counsel whose agency was among the document drafters, said, "Religion has not been taken out of the public schools, nor could it ever be. It is only state-sponsored religious speech and devotional exercises that have been removed."

U.S. Education Secretary Richard Riley lauded the statement as "one more sign that groups which have historically held different perspectives on issues involving religion and public education are working hard to bring a new spirit and a tone of good will to this often highly charged dialogue."

The statement grew out of the 68-member coalition that backed the Religious Freedom Restoration Act. It addresses 18 areas of student activity.

Public school prayer—among the most contentious issues captivating American lawmakers—was the centerpiece of the statement.

Students have the right to pray individually or in groups or to discuss their religious views if they are not disruptive, the statement says. Students enjoy

the right to read scriptures, say grace before meals and discuss religion with willing listeners subject to the same rules of order as apply to other speech.

School officials may not allow organized prayer at graduation, but churches and students may organize a baccalaureate ceremony. The courts have conflicted on the issue of student-initiated prayer at graduation.

"Until the issue is authoritatively resolved, schools should ask their lawyers what rules apply in their area."

School officials may not encourage religious or anti-religious activity, but they may teach about religion.

Students may express religious beliefs in homework assignments, but problems arise with oral presentations because the classroom is not a voluntary environment.

Students also may distribute religious materials subject to reasonable time, place and manner restrictions.

The statement also says:

- participation in "see you at the pole" events is permissible;
- religious persuasion, not harassment, by students is protected;
- student religious clubs have the same rights as other non-curricular groups to meet before and after school;
- public schools may teach about religious holidays but may not observe them as religious events;
- schools have discretion to excuse students from lessons that are objectionable to their religious beliefs;
- schools may teach civic virtues, such as honesty, citizenship, courage, respectfulness, but may not advance them as religious tenets;
- religious messages on T-shirts may not be singled out for suppression;
- schools may dismiss students to off-premises religious instruction. Δ

State court overturns ruling against church

A Minnesota appeals court has overturned a \$9.15 million judgment against St. Paul's First Church of Christ, Scientist, in the death of an 11-year-old boy whose mother relied on prayer instead of medical care to treat his diabetes.

The Minnesota Court of Appeals ruled April 4 that the church does not have to pay Ian Lundman's father either the \$9 million in punitive damages or the \$150,000 in compensatory damages previously levied by a trial court.

In a 2-1 decision, the appeals court ruled that spiritual healing is protected by the U.S. Constitution and that the church did not act in "deliberate disregard" of Ian's rights.

The court left standing, however, \$1.5 million in compensatory damages against the boy's mother and stepfather, Kathleen and William McKown, and the two Christian Science practitioners they hired to provide spiritual treatment, according to news reports.

The McKowns originally faced criminal charges of second-degree manslaughter for Ian's death in May 1989. Minnesota's Supreme Court threw out the manslaughter charges in 1991 based on a provision in the state's child-neglect statute that specifically allows parents to rely in good faith on spiritual treatment and prayer. The U.S. Supreme Court upheld that ruling in 1992.

Since the death of Ian Lundman, the Minnesota legislature has amended its laws governing treatment of minors to require that practitioners of healing arts report to proper authorities if a lack of medical care may cause imminent and serious danger to a child's health.

Christian Science was founded in 1866 by Mary Baker Eddy and is based on her ideas and interpretations of Scripture. Among the religion's teachings are that sin and sickness are illusions that can be overcome by full understanding of Jesus' teaching and healing.

"The court vindicated religious liberty with this ruling. A church should not be punished solely because of its spiritual tenets. It would be like assessing damages against Quakers for

teaching pacificism when one of its members refused to resort to violence to protect the life of another. A secular court is wholly incompetent to decide this kind of issue."

J. Brent Walker

Jewish group lauds effort to eradicate anti-Semitism

The American Jewish Committee applauded the Alliance of Baptists' statement on Jewish-Christian relations that denounces all expressions of anti-Semitism and calls for dialogue between the faith groups.

The statement, adopted unanimously by the Alliance, was the culmination of a four-year study.

"The madness, the hatred, the dehumanizing attitudes which led to the events known collectively as the Holocaust did not occur overnight or within the span of a few years, but were the culmination of centuries of Christian teaching and church-sanctioned action directed against the Jews simply because they were Jews," the statement says.

"It is in recognition of a past and present among Baptists that is complicit in perpetuating negative stereotypes and myths concerning Jews, that we, the Alliance of Baptists ... confess our sin of complicity, confess our sin of silence, confess our sin of interpreting our sacred writings in such a way that we have created enemies of the Jewish people, confess our sin of indifference and inaction to the horrors of the Holocaust, confess our sins against the Jewish people, [and] offer this confession with humility and with hope for reconciliation between Christians and Jews."

Rabbi A. James Rudin, interreligious affairs director for the American Jewish Committee, called the document "remarkable" and said it will help build mutual respect and understanding.

"The Alliance's call for 'confession and humility' because of Christian 'indifference and inaction' to the Holocaust is extraordinary in both its substance and tone. Hopefully, the Alliance's statement will serve as a model for other Christian groups to emulate."

Rabbi A. James Rudin
American Jewish Committee

Christian groups drafting prayer, voucher measure

Several conservative religious groups, including Pat Robertson's American Center for Law and Justice, are drafting a proposed constitutional amendment that could embrace public school religious clubs, graduation prayers and vouchers for parochial school tuition.

Jay Sekulow, chief counsel for Robertson's Virginia-based group, described the proposed measure as "an equal opportunity amendment" that would allow for religious expression in public venues such as school corridors and assembly halls.

Sekulow said the amendment would allow public school students to meet for prayer at the start of the school day if other kinds of student clubs or meetings are allowed. Other groups, including the Baptist Joint Committee, point out that such rights already exist under the Equal Access Act of 1984. Equal Access stipulates that students can form Bible clubs and gather to pray before and after school if the school allows other groups to meet for secular purposes.

"We already have a religious freedom amendment. It's called the First Amendment."

Rob Boston
Americans United for Separation of
Church and State

Vermont Catholic group, printers resolve dispute

A long-standing dispute over a printing company's refusal to print material for the Vermont chapter of Catholics for a Free Choice, an abortion rights group, has been settled out of court.

An agreement signed between the owners of the printing shop, the Regal Art Press in St. Albans, Vt., and Linda Paquette of Vermont Catholics for Choice acknowledges that the company has a right to refuse to print literature based on moral or religious opposition. But it also states that Regal Art Press will not refuse to do business simply on the basis of the would-be customer's creed.

Paquette filed suit claiming religious discrimination. Δ

Liberty & Law

Excerpts of recent comments by House Speaker Newt Gingrich and Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole on public school prayer:

"I am told it is not necessary. I am told that we can create a legal framework that allows us to recognize that this is a profoundly religious country, but there is no state church. I am opposed to any organized school prayer. I am opposed to the teacher having prayer. I am opposed to an official prayer."

Rep. Gingrich
CBS "Face the Nation," April 9
The Washington Times

A school-prayer bill will not come up this year because Senate Republicans have their plate full trying to catch up with measures that House Republicans passed as part of their "Contract with America." ... "I don't see how we have time this year."

Sen. Dole
April 12, *The Washington Times*

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REFLECTIONS

Good enfleshed



JAMES M. DUNN
Executive Director

Jimmy Carter, the former president, said, "Oh, hi James, I read you every month in *Report from the Capital*." I had not wanted to presume; it had been a couple of years since we had talked, and he shakes lots of hands. I said, "Mr. President,

I'm..." when he interrupted.

Shannon Harton, one of the interns, started to make his probably rehearsed speech, "Mr. President, I want to thank you for what you do for the cause of peace." Carter cut him off, having heard my introduction of the two guys, to say to them, "It's what YOU do that's important. We must continue to keep church and state separate."

That's about all there was to the brief encounter. He signed our books and we moved on.

As we headed for the subway on the cold January day, Jack McClelland, the other intern, a hulking 19-year-old, said, "We need to see if Mr. Carter would just put that comment in writing." He did. Here's the content of a note to me dated March 10, 1995.

"It was good to see you at the book-signing in Washington.

"To repeat what I told you there, I always look forward to receiving my copy of *Report from the Capital*. Keep up the good work."

(signed) Jimmy Carter

Almost exactly one year to the day before the brief "howdy" with Mr. Carter I was interviewed for Pat Robertson's "700 Club." With live camera, lights and microphone, the interviewer asked, apparently in all seriousness, "Is it possible to be a Christian and a Democrat?" Taken aback, I thought of several good answers on the way home too late for the tube. But happily I blurted out one answer on camera, "Jimmy Carter is the answer to that. He demonstrates

that it's possible." Jimmy Carter wages peace relentlessly and actually does more good than all his critics totalled up and tied in a tow-sack.

How incredibly important is the life and work of one good man. And, as he so graciously and sensitively and typically pointed out, how important and critical is the work of a pair of short-term general practitioners who have come to Washington to help out at the Baptist Joint Committee.

For several years now interns and scholars-in-residence, those at the other end of a career, have made a critical difference in the capacity of the BJC to function effectively. Willing workers, ready to do whatever needs to be done, have kept us afloat.

Shannon, a recent graduate of the University of Kentucky, and Jack, a student receiving PoliSci and Religion credits from Carson Newman College, have been outstanding. They have been two of the best we've ever had.

Shannon slaves for hours over a green-eyed word processor entering circulation data for this newsletter.

Jack goes to the bank or post office or answers the phone without whimpering ... too much.

Jimmy signs and sells his book of poetry, *Always a Reckoning*, or hammers and saws on a Habitat for Humanity house.

They do their different chores "as unto God," aware that there is a reckoning.

Of the nine politicians at the top of the political pecking order, seven are Baptist Christians. President Clinton, Vice-President Gore, Speaker Gingrich, Minority Leader Gephardt, President Pro-Tempore of the Senate Thurmond, the senior Democrat Byrd, Majority Whip Lott. We Baptists have a lot to answer for.

But yes, one can be a Democrat and a Christian, or a Republican, or an Independent, or even an intern with still shapeless politics.

The answer is found in the flesh, incarnate. Δ

BOOK REVIEW

The Way We Were How Southern Baptist Theology Has Changed and What it Means to Us All

Fisher Humphreys, New York:
McCracken Press, 1994, 174 pp.



This book is for all Baptists, because all of us, at some time, face disagreement with brothers and sisters in Christ.

Fisher Humphreys has made it possible to begin the process of understanding. Understanding often will diffuse the hostility that so commonly accompanies disagreement. Humphreys states, and rightly so, that the Southern Baptist controversy cannot be easily explained. The issues are numerous, complex and emotionally charged. Therefore, he offers this book: one interpretation emphasizing theology or beliefs.

The Way We Were is divided into easy-to-read, logically organized parts.

Part one traces the beliefs that Southern Baptists share with Christians (the doctrine of God, salvation through Christ), Protestants (justification by grace, the church is imperfect), all Baptists (autonomous and self-governing congregations, no creed), and Revivalists (evangelism, missions).

Part two are those beliefs that find expression in Calvinistic, Landmark, Deeper Life, Fundamentalist and Progressive traditions. Humphreys focuses on each of these because they either have influenced Baptists or have been embraced by Southern Baptists. In this description, one can easily recognize the foundations for many current divergent beliefs.

Part three emphasizes theological shifts. Humphreys projects that Southern Baptists of the future will still agree with basic Christian tenets. Beliefs shared with Protestants and other Baptist groups will be the subject of debate. Of the beliefs unique to Baptists, five are listed as factors in the current Southern Baptist controversy, including the traditional understanding

of the separation of church and state. Humphreys acknowledges that it is sometimes difficult to balance the No Establishment and Free Exercise clauses of the First Amendment. However, he also cites calls for state-sponsored public school prayer and private school vouchers as counter to the long-standing Southern Baptist insistence on government neutrality toward religion.

Humphreys finally describes the "New Convention." He laments the reduction of congregational democracy, devaluation of the believer's priesthood, increased importance of creedalism, but "the loss of the principle of the separation of church and state is the greatest tragedy in the history of the Southern Baptist Convention."

Humphreys' book is not only a tool to understanding historical Baptist beliefs, but a valuable resource to those who wish to understand more about those on the other side of church disputes and denominational disagreements. Δ

Charline Berry

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REPORT (ISSN-0346-0661) is published 24 times each year by the Baptist Joint Committee.

Established in 1936

Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs
200 Maryland Avenue, N.E., Washington, D.C. 20002
202-544-4226

Supporting bodies: Alliance of Baptists • American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A. • Baptist General Conference • Cooperative Baptist Fellowship • National Baptist Convention of America • National Baptist Convention U.S.A. Inc. • National Missionary Baptist Convention • North American Baptist Conference • Progressive National Baptist Convention Inc. • Religious Liberty Council • Seventh Day Baptist General Conference • Southern Baptist state conventions and churches.

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