



REPORT FROM THE CAPITAL

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NewsMakers

◆ **Bill Wilson**, a member of the Baptist Joint Committee, has been elected president of the Baptist General Association of Virginia. Wilson is pastor of First Baptist Church of Waynesboro, Va. **Russell Dilday**, a former BJC member and a former Southern Baptist Convention seminary president fired by fundamentalist trustees, was elected president of the Baptist General Convention of Texas. The Texas convention also affirmed its "autonomy" and authorized the state body to appoint missionaries, offer new options for theological education and create mission partnerships with groups, including the moderate Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

◆ **Wayne and Sue Willis**, parents of the only Jewish students in the Troy, Ala., area, have filed a lawsuit charging that their children have been persecuted by elementary and high school students, teachers and administrators, according to The Freedom Forum's First Amendment Center. Incidents of religious persecution cited in the suit include: orders that the Willis children bow their heads during Christian prayers, a disciplinary essay on "Why Jesus Loves Me" and a local minister's warning in a school assembly that those who do not accept Jesus as their savior are doomed to hell. Δ

Clinton discusses race issues with over 100 religious leaders

President Bill Clinton told approximately 120 religious leaders at a Nov. 20 White House breakfast that racial and religious diversity is growing, noting that within 50 years, no single racial group will be a majority in the nation.

He said, "The scholars have said for 200 years that America was not about race or a place, it was about an idea. We're about to find out. And we had best be ready."

The religious leaders, representing Christian, Jewish, Islamic and other faiths, discussed racial initiatives and other issues during a nearly two-hour private meeting with Clinton.

Clinton said statistics point to a growing diversity in the nation. "We know what we're going to look like — the demographics can tell us that. But they can't tell us what we're going to be like. That's a decision we have to make.

"And I am persuaded that we will be an infinitely better, stronger nation if that decision is informed by, driven by, embraced by and advanced by people of faith in our country," he said.

During remarks open to the press, Clinton said racial problems can be seen in the high juvenile crime rates, exploding prison population, disparities among credit practices of banks, access to higher education and earnings in the workplace.

"It is clear that our attempt to keep making progress toward the American dream requires us to make progress on

the issues of race," Clinton said.

He said the nation "started with a Constitution that we couldn't live up to — just like none of us live up perfectly to the holy Scriptures that we profess to believe in." He added, "After all, we said

all men are created equal, but you can't vote unless you're a white male landowner. I mean that's where we started. We're a long way from that today."

Clinton thanked the religious leaders for working

together on the enactment of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993 and on education guidelines to clarify what religious expression is allowed under current law in public schools.

Parts of the 1993 law bolstering protections for religious practice were declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court. Clinton noted that he issued an executive order instructing federal officials to apply the principles of that law to protect the religious practices of federal employees.

Clinton also applauded the religious community for its work to battle global religious persecution and its involvement in his welfare-to-work initiatives.

One participant at the breakfast called the meeting "historic." Marvin Griffin, pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Austin, Texas, and a member of the Baptist Joint Committee, said the fact that the "chief executive officer of the nation called a group of religious leaders together and asked for their help in addressing the racial problem is historic." Δ



Demographics can tell us what we're going to look like but not what we're going to be like. That's a decision we have to make.

— President Clinton

Quoting

To require prayer of students is to use the power of government to force people to engage in religious activity. Baptists, among all people, should recognize such a position is a violation of one's God-given religious liberty. To use the power of government to require a religious activity of both the classroom teacher and the students is equally wrong. Government has no authority to invade the spiritual kingdom that belongs only to God.

Surely Baptists understand that if government is granted the right to require prayer, then government also is granted the right to prohibit prayer. Government becomes the source of one's basic rights instead of one's rights coming from the Creator God.

— Bobby S. Terry
Editor
The Alabama Baptist

Human rights rooted in God, Dunn tells U.N. audience

A proper understanding of human rights is "rooted in the Hebrew-Christian idea of God," Baptist Joint Committee Executive Director James M. Dunn said Nov. 21 at the United Nations in New York.

Dunn's remarks were part of a forum titled: "Ideology and Human Rights: Freedom of Religion" at the Church Center of the United Nations. The gathering was sponsored by the Baptist World Alliance, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, Church Women United and the Mennonite Central Committee.

Dunn told the audience that a commitment to human rights is shared by all who believe in a personal God that made mankind in his image.

"Precisely the spark of the Divine in us all that calls out for human worth, that responds to the dignity of persons, also demands that we respect and guard and defend that high view of God's highest creation," he said.

"Jesus' inaugural address begins with these words: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.' By his own definition then, and that should be sufficient for any of his followers, the gospel preacher without evident passion for the poor is a contradiction in terms," Dunn said.

He said this "high view" of human rights is broad enough to include all aspects of life, has concern for all people, and will always be a perpetual challenge.

"We struggle to keep belief and behavior consistent," Dunn said.

The inability to live up to an impossible ideal is no excuse for inaction, he said. "We are free to fail because our rightness with God is not measured by success or the bookkeeper's bottom line at the end of the quarter. We are free to fail, but we are not free to fail to act," he said.

Religious freedom is based on the belief that all people have a freedom to respond to God's sovereignty, Dunn said.

"Decisions regarding matters of ultimate belief and commitment must be free, uncoerced, to have any value, to tell any truth, to have integrity," he said.

Dunn referred to the U.S. Supreme Court's recent invalidation of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act and a new Russian Federation law that restricts

the activities of religious minorities as setbacks for human rights in general and religious freedom in particular.

"Alas, the only genuinely universal thing about human rights is their universal violation," he said.

Dunn concluded his address by saying that "human rights, so indissolubly related to, rooted in and realized by religious freedom, will continue to be a high priority for believers." Δ

Prayer ruling reflects current law, Walker says

A federal district judge's order barring "officially sanctioned" religious activities in Alabama public school classrooms is consistent with long-standing court rulings against state-sponsored religious exercises, according to a Baptist church-state specialist.

J. Brent Walker, general counsel at the Baptist Joint Committee, said Judge Ira DeMent's ruling is "generally in line with the much-heralded and widely accepted guidelines on religion in the public schools and Supreme Court rulings."

Walker cited guidelines issued by a coalition of religious groups and the federal Department of Education that detail a wide range of permissible religious expression in public schools.

DeMent's ruling "says 'no' to school-sponsored religious exercises, but 'yes' to student-initiated ones," Walker said. "That's how it should be."

DeMent's ruling, directed at DeKalb County schools, sparked widespread controversy in Alabama. It has drawn fire from Gov. Fob James and parts of the ruling are being challenged in court by Attorney General Bill Pryor.

The ruling bars activities such as vocal prayer, devotional or scriptural readings, distribution of religious materials, texts, or announcements and "discussions of a devotional/inspirational nature" when they are conducted as "school organized or officially sanctioned" activities. It also bars the delivery of devotional messages over the school's public address system during the instructional day.

DeMent did not bar the educational use of religious texts, students' voluntary religious expression in homework or reports, students' display of religious symbols on their clothing or the right of secondary school students to meet for religious purposes during noninstructional time. Δ

Reflections

James M. Dunn

Executive Director



Whining about Christian bashing has become a popular pastime. To whimper about attempts to “shut out Bible-believing Christians from the public square” credentials right-wing extremists. Complaints abound about those who use “church-state separation” to minimize Christian involvement in government.

What utter silliness. What demagoguery. What is the name of that poor dead horse they are beating?

Working for 15 brands of Baptists at the busiest intersection of church-state activity, I find no one beating up on believers for being good citizens. Since lobbying is simply “attempting to influence legislation,” every Christian should be a lobbyist.

No one or group that I encounter suggests that separation of church and state means the total divorcement of religion from politics. Nobody near public life contends that religion is purely personal with no political consequences.

Everyone from the ACLU to the Christian Legal Society, from the National Council of Churches to the National Association of Evangelicals, from the Parents and Teachers Association to the home schoolers, appeals to believers to act on their deepest beliefs in the public arena. Literally, dozens of citizen activists are able to work together to produce *A Shared Vision: Religious Liberty in the 21st Century, Religion in the Public Schools: A Joint Statement of Current Law and other initiatives.*

All the groups mentioned above and many, many more are vigorously engaged in public witness. Their lawyers sit at our conference table, pool their wisdom, plan their work and work their prayed-over plans. What has spawned this current crop of complainers? Why, oh why, do they weep?

◆ Some think their view is the Christian position.

◆ Some know little or nothing of history, constitutional constraints or current

law.

◆ Some are simply not willing to play by the rules. For instance, they’d like tax exemption and tax deductibility (501(c)(3)) for their church or organization but want to play like a political party.

◆ Some want to be “in the kitchen, but cannot stand the heat.” They accuse but cannot tolerate being accused.

◆ Some oversimplify the issues to the point of deceit. Everything can not easily be tagged “right” or “wrong.”

◆ Some actually presume to speak for everyone who bears their faith “label.”

◆ Alas, some are willing to shade the truth because it gets “amens.”

Former Senator Mark Hatfield, R-Ore., a conservative Baptist quoted in *Men in Action*, AB Men’s splendid newsletter said: “Paul wrote of pluralism in the Body of Christ, yet today there is an effort to say that you must conform to given perspectives, or else you aren’t really following Christ.”

In response to Allen Z. Abbot’s questions, Hatfield continued: “I defend any group’s right to participate for any legitimate concerns of governing. But I get uneasy when they apply the word “Christian” to their political action. This tends to communicate to a secular and non-believing society that adopting their political agenda makes you a Christian. I don’t accept that as a biblical fact. Christ asked Peter, “What do you think of me?” The real issue is not pro-life or pro-choice, but what is Christ in your life?”

“I’ve experienced more conflict in that realm than by being a Christian in a secular profession. What I’ve confronted is the increasing political agenda by well-meaning and devout Christians — I don’t challenge their faith whatsoever — but it does mis-speak as to what makes one a Christian. It’s not a political agenda. They forget about the diversity within the body of Christ.”

Hey! Don’t be a petty griper. Get with it. Practice your faith. Δ

Quoting

I think that one of the worst things we can do as believers in Christ is to spend our time condemning others who profess a faith in Christ. I think we should be spending our time being generous and compassionate, and helping others. Too many Southern Baptist leaders are acting like the Pharisees did, making judgments on behalf of God. I think that’s wrong.

— Former President Jimmy Carter, commenting to journalists on plans by the Southern Baptist Convention to seek to convert Mormons during the convention’s June 1998 meeting in Salt Lake City.
(Religion News Service)

Baptist Joint Committee

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
- ◆ National African Baptist Conference
- ◆ Progressive National Baptist Convention Inc.
- ◆ Religious Liberty Council
- ◆ Seventh Day Baptist General Conference
- ◆ Southern Baptist state conventions/churches

REPORT FROM THE CAPITAL

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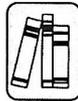


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Book Review

RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS AND THE LAW

William W. Bassett, Clark Boardman Callaghan, Deerfield, Ill., 2 Volumes, (\$260, 800-323-1336).



Within the past decade, U.S. churches have been involved in an unprecedented amount of litigation. Not only are churches bringing more constitutional claims, they are increasingly sued for their direct ministerial service, as well as the social, educational and charitable organizations they operate. Until now, there was no comprehensive single source of information available to assist the attorney who advises a church in arriving at a well-considered and knowledgeable position on the growing number of legal issues confronting today's churches.

William Bassett, a Catholic theologian and professor of law at the University of San Francisco, has prepared this scholarly work for attorneys who provide counsel and advice to churches and their related auxiliaries on matters of law. He states his purpose as twofold: "first, to create a comprehensive treatise that is accurate, complete, practical and capable of regular updating to accommodate the fast-moving developments in the law that concern churches and religious organizations as corporate entities in America; second, to acquaint readers with the polity and the deliberative processes of the churches themselves."

The volumes are divided into 10 chapters: (1) Religious Organizations; (2) The Freedom of the Churches: The First

Freedom; (3) Corporate Choices and Organizational Structures of Churches and Religious Organizations; (4) Formation, Control and Security of Religious Organizations; (5) Management and Financial Accountability; (6) Employment Standards and Policies; (7) The Churches in Court: Fundamentals of Litigation; (8) Specific Causes of Action for Personal Injury/Criminal Liability of Churches; (9) Education, Health Care and Social Service; and (10) Religious Liberty and Public Constraint.

Each chapter is preceded by an analytical table of contents and supported by pertinent case briefs and statutes. Mr. Bassett has remained objective in the holdings penned by the courts and has avoided injecting his personal opinions. Chapter 2, however, was written before the U.S. Supreme Court declared the Religious Freedom Restoration Act unconstitutional and must be modified to reflect the current state of law regarding the free exercise of religion. The editor states that the treatise is scheduled to be updated in July 1998. Until then, caution should be exercised in relying on this section.

Although the author comes from the Catholic tradition, the treatise is pan-denominational. Baptist ideals of the separation of church and state are frequently mentioned and validated. This treatise is convenient and well-written, but it is neither aimed at the lay person nor inexpensive. The two volume work costs \$260. Nevertheless, it is an excellent resource for the attorney asked to provide counsel or advice to churches and other religious organizations.

— **Marcus M. Johns, Esquire**
BJC Legal Intern

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