

FROM WASHINGTON OFFICE
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April 3, 1964

Baptist Group Attacked
For Amendment Stand

WASHINGTON (BP)-- An attack on the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs for its defense of the First Amendment as it now stands and its opposition to proposed constitutional amendments relating to Bible reading and prayers in public schools has been published in the Congressional Record.

Sen. Strom Thurmond (D., S.C.), a Baptist, inserted in the Record attacks on the Baptist committee by Baptist pastors and churches in Charleston, S.C. The insertion included a story from the News and Courier of Charleston, a letter from Woodrow W. Britton, a Baptist layman, and a resolution passed by the Rutledge Avenue Baptist Church, Charleston, of which Douglas N. Baker is pastor.

The occasion of the attack on the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs was a news story on the semi-annual meeting of the committee in Atlantic City, N.Y., March 5-6. The original story appeared in the Philadelphia Inquirer and has been given wide circulation among Baptists by a New Jersey radio broadcaster and in an independent religious publication.

When asked about the news story and the attacks, Walter Pope Binns, former president of William Jewell College, Liberty, Mo., and chairman of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, said that "the story obviously distorts the action of the committee." "Some of the attacks were made without checking with the committee for correct information," he said.

W. Barry Garrett, associate director of the committee, was quoted in the story as saying that the action of the committee "puts us on record as opposing any constitutional amendment which will allow the Bible in public schools." He denied having made this statement.

Binns explained that "the position of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs has always been clear. It has openly and continually given its views on recent Supreme Court decisions relating to religion in public schools to the Baptist Press and other channels of information to the Baptist people."

"There is nothing new in our position," Binns said, "and the Public Affairs Committee stands firm in its fight for religious freedom and against all efforts to amend the Constitution to allow government on any level to regulate in any way the religious life of the people."

The correct story and the complete text of the resolution of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs in its Atlantic City meeting was distributed to both Baptist publications and secular papers throughout the nation. In its resolution the committee reaffirmed "its conviction that laws and regulations prescribing prayers or devotional exercises do not contribute to a free exercise of religion."

"The effect of this action," according to Associate Director Garrett, "puts the committee on record as opposing the 'Becker amendment' as well as all the 143 other proposed constitutional amendments that would alter the meaning of the First Amendment."

"This does not mean," Garrett continued, "that the committee opposes children praying or reading the Bible if they want to do so. But it does mean that the committee opposes the regulation of such praying and reading by any level of government ---local, state or national."

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"This is in the best tradition of Baptist heritage and doctrine of voluntary religion and religious freedom," he concluded.

The Charleston newspaper story said that petitions are being circulated by local pastors and churches "to support passage of a proposed constitutional amendment permitting Bible reading in public schools."

Information on the attack on the Baptist committee was sent to Sen. Thurmond by Britton, chairman of a group of laymen who are sponsoring petitions favoring a constitutional amendment.

The Rutledge Avenue Baptist Church in its resolution went on record "as disapproving and denouncing the invalid action of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs."

In reply to attacks on the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, C. Emanuel Carlson, executive director, said that the committee does not seek to speak for individual Baptists or local churches. "However," he said, "the committee is authorized to represent official views of its sponsoring conventions, to make pronouncements when religious liberty is endangered, and to report its findings and views on current issues."

Following the announcement that hearings before the House Judiciary Committee would be held on proposals to alter the First Amendment by a new constitutional amendment, Carlson made an extensive analysis of what was involved in the changes. His "staff report" was printed in the March 1964 issue of "Report From The Capital," a monthly bulletin published by the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs.

In his analysis Carlson hit hard in defense of the First Amendment as "the finest part of our American heritage." He declared that an amendment to guarantee the free exercise of religion is not needed. "That is already guaranteed in the First Amendment," he said.

In an article prepared for Baptist papers Garrett pointed out that the present agitation for a constitutional amendment relating to prayers and Bible reading in public schools is a result of misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the recent Supreme Court decisions.

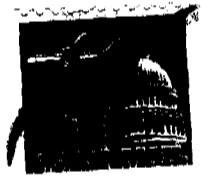
"Our Baptist forefathers made a most significant contribution to religious freedom in their efforts to get the First Amendment into the Constitution," he said. "It would be tragic if present-day Baptists because of misunderstanding and misinformation were to contribute to the undoing of the First Amendment."

The Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs is a responsible denominational agency sponsored by eight national Baptist bodies in North America. The members of the committee are elected by the sponsoring conventions. The members are among the most respected Baptist leaders in the nation.

The cooperating conventions are: American Baptist Convention; Southern Baptist Convention; Baptist General Conference; North American Baptist General Conference; National Baptist Convention of America; National Baptist Convention, U.S.A, Inc.; Baptist Federation of Canada; and the General Conference of Seventh Day Baptists.



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