

**BAPTIST PRESS**

News Service of the Southern Baptist Convention

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March 8, 1971

**First Baptist Birmingham  
Says Issue Was Not Race**

**BIRMINGHAM (BP)**--The deacons and members of First Baptist Church, Birmingham, have issued a lengthy statement saying that "race was not the main issue" in a controversy that split the church last October.

It was the first official statement the church and its deacons had issued since the issue erupted in July of 1970 when two Negroes, Mrs. Winifred Bryant and her daughter, Twila, sought membership in the church.

From July until December, the church came within a few votes of asking the staff to resign and later voted to reject the Negro applicants. When the staff resigned in protest, about 300 members walked out to organize a new congregation which in December was chartered as the Baptist Church of the Covenant.

On Feb. 24, the First Baptist Church issued a statement saying that race was not the main issue, but rather the leadership of Herbert Gilmore, former pastor who now is pastor of the Baptist Church of the Covenant.

"The church was severely divided about Dr. Gilmore before the black persons ever came forward for membership," the statement issued by the church said.

"The division involved his refusal to visit shut-ins and elderly members despite repeated requests to do so; his approach to child evangelism; problems with staff personnel which led to the resignation of several long-time staff members; his liberal and humanistic preaching which de-emphasized the Bible; and his failure to promote evangelism," the statement continued.

"The church also had financial problems which included the moving of church staff offices to a new area with new furnishings at an expenditure of \$27,000 when only \$6,000 had been authorized by the deacons and the church," said the statement.

Gilmore, responding to the statement issued by the church, said he regretted that the church "has not yet faced up to the real issue that divided the membership. The simple truth is that when two black people, who were the fruit of the church's ministry, tried to join the church, they were rejected.

"Whatever shortcomings the pastor may or may not have had, he had nothing to do with the church's rejection of the two blacks," Gilmore continued. "The church voted to exclude the blacks. That was the issue. When the First Baptist Church opens its membership to black people, then everyone can take seriously the charge that the issue was not race."

The chairman of the board of deacons at First Baptist Church, Bob Sanders, requested after a lengthy telephone interview with Baptist Press that all comments responding to Gilmore's remarks and giving background on the church's statement be considered "off the record."

Sanders, administrator of Hillcrest Hospital, said that statements from the church must be cleared by a press release committee, and that on checking with the interim pastor after the telephone interview, a decision was made that no comment should be made "that might be harmful to the church and upset the people."

Sanders said that the church would stand on the text of the statement approved by the deacons and the church. The statement said, in part:

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"Over the last several months, the First Baptist Church of Birmingham has received much publicity which the present members of the church neither sought nor wanted. The church has been silent until now, as we felt that our problems were problems to be decided within the church and not in the newspapers or on the radio or TV...."

The statement charged that the issue was not race, but the leadership of Gilmore as pastor, and added that Gilmore made no effort to reach solutions, and refused to resign.

"Before the black persons came forward for membership," the statement continued, "the church had never prayed about open membership; there was no churchwide Bible studies, seminars or conferences held on this question. Dr. Gilmore was told by several leaders that the church was not spiritually prepared to vote on the membership of black persons. He refused to listen to these members and insisted on a vote. Numerous members have insisted that they voted against the black persons because they felt this was another effort on the part of Dr. Gilmore to further divide the church.

"Two hundred thirty-nine resident members of First Baptist withdrew their membership and formed another church under the leadership of Dr. Gilmore. Eight hundred forty-eight resident and 521 non-resident members remained at First Baptist. During January and February, 1971, 17 members joined First Baptist by letter and 10 were baptized.

"Despite the loss of membership and staff leadership," the statement said, "there is evident at First Baptist Church a new willingness on the part of all members to serve wherever they are needed. Ministries to the deaf, senior citizens and the people of Central City have continued. The tutoring program for both black and white students at the neighborhood school has been reorganized and is underway again in a more effective manner.

"Attendance at the women's meetings and at the Wednesday night family supper and prayer meeting has increased. Sunday School attendance is averaging 83 fewer per Sunday. We gave \$6,400 to the December Lottie Moon Offering for Foreign Missions against a goal of \$4,250. The church has subscribed \$160,349 toward its 1971 budget," it continued.

After expressing appreciation to those who have preached at the church since Gilmore left and to A. Ben Oliver, former Southern Baptist missionary to Brazil who has been called as interim pastor, the statement concluded by saying:

"We do not know all the reasons for that which has occurred in recent months. We do know that the Bible teaches us to forget those things which are behind and to reach forward to those things which are before. We believe the Bible to be the Word of God and the basis of our faith...We ask for the prayers of all who believe as we do as we search out the pastor God has chosen to lead this church...

"God honors those who honor His Son and His Word. God is not dead. Neither is the First Baptist Church of Birmingham, Ala.," the statement concluded.

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Southwestern Seminary Board  
Sets Buildings, New Department

3/8/71

FORT WORTH (BP)--Trustees of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary here approved the construction of four new apartment buildings and recommended the establishment of a new department of continuing education for ministry.

During a semi-annual session, the board approved the four new buildings, with 32 apartment units, as part of expansion of the J. Howard Williams Student Village.

Immediate construction of the buildings was authorized. Rent from the apartment units is expected to cover a loan for construction, a seminary official said.

Plans are proceeding for a new children's building, and for the renovation of Price Hall, the seminary's religious education building. Construction is expected to begin in about six months, the committee reported.

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In another major action, the trustees recommended that the proposed new department of continuing education for ministry be responsible for a unified approach to continuing theological education for ministers to update and expand their education in a variety of settings.

The board elected Phillip H. Briggs, currently an associate professor of religious education at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Kansas City, as a new associate professor of education administration at Southwestern.

H. Leon McBeth, associate professor of church history, was promoted to full professorship by the trustees.

A joint trustee-faculty dinner honored two retiring faculty members at the nation's largest non-Catholic seminary. The banquet paid tribute to Alpha Melton, professor of social work who has taught since 1945; and Gracie Knowlton, professor of secretarial training, who has taught since 1947. Both retire Aug. 1.

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Christian Composers Group  
Gears To Pop "Jesus Music"

3/8/71

FORT WORTH (BP)--The Fellowship of Christian Composers based here is gearing up for what it hopes will become a nationwide information service for young people about up-and-coming religious pop music.

The group, which has been organized for three years, has named a board of advisors including a number of prominent Southern Baptist musicians. George Beverly Shea of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, has been named honorary chairman of the board.

A free monthly bulletin, "The Sheet," will provide reviews, information about the artists and other features on selections from the rock, country and western, and easy-listening categories of music, according to the organization's president.

Billie Hanks, a Southern Baptist evangelist and composer who heads the fellowship, said he hopes young people receiving the bulletin will contact local disc jockeys about the selections to "help keep the message of Christ prominent in broadcasting.

"Our plans were well underway before the current invasion of pop music charts by religious music," Hanks said. "The upswing in acceptance of religious music, however, encourages us to redouble our efforts."

Hanks said the effort of the Fellowship of Christian Composers will have several facets. "We hope to encourage Christian composers to produce music with a competitive sound and a Christ-centered message, as well as provide information on what is already being written.

"I believe that the wall between the sacred and the secular is being breached in the field of music," he said. "How else can you explain the sudden popularity of 'Amazing Grace,' a 200-year-old hymn, and the other 'Jesus songs' now moving up on the charts?"

Although Hanks said he and the group of young composers see value in any music which "glorifies the name of Christ," they hope to center their efforts "on music which has sound theology as well as competitive beat."

Hanks added that Paul Stookey of the recording group, Peter, Paul and Mary, recently made a profession of faith in Christ and told Hanks: "In the next two years, you'll see 70 per cent of pop music go to spiritual themes, but much of it will be spiritualism and Satan worship. So we Christians are going to have to move now."

Southern Baptists named to the board of advisors for the organization include Bob Oldenburg, composer of "Good News" and minister of youth at First Baptist Church, San Antonio, Tex.; Miss Joe Ann Shelton, noted Southern Baptist soloist and former director of program music for the Southern Baptist Radio and Television Commission here; Burl Redd, music consultant for the commission here; Lee Roy Till, minister of music at First Baptist Church, Dallas; Grady Wilson of the Billy Graham Team; composer John Peterson; and the recently-elected number one country and western disc jockey in the nation, Bill Mack of the SBC Radio-TV Commission's "Country Cross Roads" radio program.

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Hanks said that youth people interested in receiving the organization's monthly bulletin, "The Sheet," could do so by writing P. O. Box 6181 in Fort Worth.

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CORRECTIONS

On BP story headlined, "Houston Church Tops 1,000 Mark in Baptisms" mailed 3/5/71, please change graph 8, line 2, to read "Houston area Baptist churches of Spireno converts...." (changing word "in" to word "of") and graph 15, line 2, to read, "...congregation was youth rather than adults; 2. the music had an up-..." (changing word "you" to "youth," and word "must" to "music.") Thanks

--Baptist Press



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