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November 24, 1971

Reaction Roundup

Revision of Becoming Prompts
Record Response toward BSSB

by Jim Newton

NASHVILLE (BP)--When officials of the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board here decided to revise a quarterly for teenagers after it had been printed because it contained material on race relations which they felt was "subject to misinterpretation," little did they know their decision would prompt what one board official called the most response in the shortest time in board history.

Just 28 days after the decision was first made public through a Religious News Service report, more than 20 Baptist groups had passed resolutions concerning the decision, 15 Baptist state paper editors had written editorials or columns about the matter, and about 400 persons had written letters to the Sunday School Board concerning the decision.

All but one of the resolutions expressed some degree of opposition to the decision. Eleven of the editorials opposed to some extent the quarterly revision, while four state Baptist papers carried seven editorials supporting the board officials' decision.

A tally of the letters received by the board disclosed that 314 letters opposed writers' understanding of the action, while 71 were supportive.

Most of the letters were probably prompted by reports circulated in the secular press, which told the world of the decision in bold headlines. Several daily newspapers and one national newsmagazine (Newsweek) printed not only news stories, but also a photograph of a young black man talking with two white girls which allegedly was considered by board officials to be "subject to misinterpretation" along with some textual material on racial reconciliation.

"The shock waves are still coming in," commented The Maryland Baptist in an editorial. "The issue is by no means settled."

The editorials in the Baptist state papers have ranged from several which commended the board officials for their "editorial responsibility," to others which called the decision "un-Christian and unwise," and "a serious error of judgment."

In between were such adjectives and descriptive phrases as "a regrettable blunder," "a sad comment on Baptist life," "an unwise and unfortunate judgment," and "a doozy" of a decision.

How have board officials, who made the decision, responded to the flood of reaction?

James L. Sullivan, executive secretary of the board, and Allen B. Comish, director of the Church Services and Materials Division, had this to say concerning the reaction:

"At the time we took the action to revise Becoming and Becoming for Leaders, we thought we were taking a correct action.

"We did not seek the publicity that attended the decision, although we recognize that all of our work must be done under the eyes of the public, especially the Baptist public," the statement said. "We regret that much of the publicity in the daily and secular weekly press has been distorted, based on untruths and drawing unwarranted conclusions.

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"We regret deeply the consequences of these distortions, and commit ourselves anew to maintaining the high standards of the publications and programs of the Sunday School Board. We shall continue to speak to critical issues. We believe that our accomplishments will speak for themselves in rebuttal to unwarranted criticism."

The board leaders said they "accept and act upon constructive criticism. We are charged by the Southern Baptist Convention with the responsibility of producing published materials. We interpret this responsibility to include the prerogative of making changes to improve the materials at any stage of the publishing process, including revision of already printed materials."

"We call for the prayers of those who are interested in the work of the board as our employees continue to seek to serve and to lead our constituency in a faithful and creative manner," the board leaders' statement concluded.

The board officials' stance has been supported editorially by the Baptist Record of Mississippi, the Word and Way of Missouri, the Baptist and Reflector of Tennessee, and the Baptist Courier of South Carolina. The Mississippi, Missouri, and Tennessee editors have carried two editorials, or columns, each in defense of the board leaders.

Calling the decision "editorial responsibility" rather than "censorship," the Baptist Record editorial commended Sullivan and Comish for the decision. "In this decision these responsible leaders acted wisely and they should have the commendation of all Southern Baptists," wrote Joe T. Odle, the Mississippi editor.

In a second editorial, Odle charged that criticism of the board is "uncalled for," and was "making a mountain out of a molehill." The critics have forgotten the board's long record of dealing with race relations, and they should be "defending the . . . board leaders, thanking God for the responsible manner in which they are handling their task," Odle wrote.

The Word and Way of Missouri, in two columns written by editor W. Ross Edwards, praised Sullivan for "this courageous step." The Baptist and Reflector editor, in an editorial and a personal column, expressed confidence in the board leaders, saying the board "has been 'clobbered' unjustly." The Baptist Courier called the furor "much ado about nothing."

Editorials in 10 other Baptist state papers, however, disagreed, several charging that the decision was unwise, that it had caused irreparable damage to Southern Baptist efforts in race relations, and that the decision to withdraw and revise the quarterly's material had done far more harm than would have been done by releasing the material unchanged.

Seven Baptist state conventions adopted resolutions expressing "displeasure," "regret," "distress," "extreme disappointment," and "deep sorrow and grief" over the board's decision to revise the quarterly. The Mississippi convention, however, commended the board in general terms for the "excellent manner" in which it is performing its tasks.

In perhaps the strongest resolution by a state convention, District of Columbia Baptists called the decision "a particular insult to the black Christians of our convention," saying that it "undermines the continuing efforts of our churches and this convention to bridge racial division and promote reconciliation. . . ."

Expressing "deep sorrow and grief" over the action, the District of Columbia convention urged the board to make a public apology "for putting a higher priority on literature sales and denominational harmony than on courageous obedience to the word of God."

In a resolution voicing "displeasure" over the action, the Maryland Baptist Convention urged its own churches to examine attitudes toward the race issue, and to open church membership and fellowship to all races "so that our preachments will be practices."

A vice president of the Maryland convention, Robert Crowley of Rockville, Md., warned the convention against hypocritically adopting a state Baptist resolution but not practicing racial justice locally. Questioning if the Sunday School Board leaders were "running scared," Crowley suggested that if such is the case, board leaders might be "reflecting our attitudes."

The Virginia, California, Northwest (Oregon-Washington), Kentucky and North Carolina conventions also adopted resolutions expressing regret, disappointment, or displeasure over the board action.

The North Carolina resolution observed that the decision "has both shocked and disappointed concerned Christians of all races" and created "tensions for all who would work for Christian brotherhood in this state."

The North Carolina convention also expressed "deep regret" over the resignation of Frank Grayum, the editor of *Becoming*, but stated: ". . . we honor the integrity of his Christian witness, and express our continuing interest in his ministry of reconciliation."

Both the Kentucky and California conventions elected black Baptist pastors as vice presidents, and the Northwest convention two years ago elected a Negro woman as vice president. All three conventions pointed out there were numerous integrated and black churches affiliated with their state Southern Baptist bodies.

The Kentucky Convention resolution further noted that "the handling of this event has pictured Southern Baptists as being largely racial segregationists, and has raised serious questions about our commitment to racial reconciliation." Before the convention, the Kentucky Baptist Executive Board also expressed disappointment in the matter.

The Mississippi Baptist Convention, however, adopted its resolution committee's proposal to commend the board, and Sullivan, for "the excellent manner in which they are performing their tasks." A Jackson, Miss., pastor earlier had asked that the convention commend Sullivan and endorse his action, but the committee softened the wording by eliminating specific reference to the *Becoming* decision.

Two state Baptist Student Union Conventions, meeting in North and South Carolina, adopted resolutions concerning the controversy. North Carolina Baptist students said they "deplore the timidity" of the board in withdrawing the publication and urged board leaders to issue a public apology. The South Carolina students urged churches in their state to observe a "day of reconciliation and prayer" on Nov. 21 to "emphasize harmonious race relations."

The Student Congress at Baylor University, Waco, Tex., the nation's largest Baptist school, also adopted a resolution expressing "extreme disappointment" and observing the decision could cause "unfortunate repercussions among fellow Christians in the black community."

Two black Baptist bodies issued statements confirming to some extent the students' fears.

The executive committee of the National Baptist Publishing Board in Nashville called the decision "a setback in our Christian endeavors." And the General Baptist State Convention of North Carolina (Negro), meeting in Raleigh, N.C., called the decision "shocking and disappointing."

The North Carolina Negro group asked Sullivan and Comish to explain "how they reconcile such action with the Christian principle of the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man," and to explain "exactly what was wrong with the picture" in the publication. They also asked that the publication be released so it could be judged on its merits.

In an unprecedented move, the executive secretary of the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina (Southern Baptist) and the director of interracial cooperation for the convention visited the Negro convention and issued an apology. W. Perry Crouch, the executive secretary, said he deeply regretted the decision, and Corbin Cooper, the interracial cooperation director, labeled the decision "a bomb." Cooper said one black pastor's teenage church members met at Sunday School and destroyed their Southern Baptist quarterlies.

Meanwhile, in Texas, the presidents of six state Baptist conventions (black, white and Mexican-American) who sponsored a mass interracial evangelistic rally at Houston's Astrodome in October, issued a joint statement calling the decision "regrettable" and saying it failed to reflect new attitudes of love between Baptists of all races on the "grass roots" level.

On the local level, at least four Southern Baptist churches adopted resolutions opposing the decision, all in different parts of the country. The four included Oakhurst Baptist Church, Decatur, Ga.; Crescent Hill Baptist Church, Louisville; College Avenue Baptist Church, Annapolis, Md.; and Manhattan Baptist Church, New York City. The Executive Board of the Metropolitan New York Baptist Association also adopted a brief resolution.

In perhaps the strongest resolution by a local congregation, the Manhattan Church in a three-page resolution pledged to join any other Southern Baptist churches which may have begun a boycott, by declaring "that we not purchase Sunday School or Training Union material published by the Sunday School Board until such time as the board shows more concern for the demands of the gospel of Jesus Christ."

The Oakhurst church resolution charged that the board's action indicates "a major share of the (race) problem rests within our denomination and with its leadership, which speaks clearly on such matters as pornography, alcoholism and gambling, but has no certain word on racism, preferring instead to say 'it is an individual church matter under Baptist polity.'"

An editorial in the Illinois Baptist, however, observed that despite all the bad publicity which had done great damage to the image of Southern Baptists, some good will likely come from the controversy.

Pointing out that the paper had received more letters on this issue than on any topic in recent years, the Illinois editorial, written by Robert Hastings, concluded that in the future, the board and all other SBC agencies will be bolder in speaking to current issues without fear of reprisal.

"From all sections has come a groundswell of criticism of the withdrawal, which, stated positively, is a groundswell of approval for forthrightness on the race issue," said the Illinois editorial.

An editorial in the Western Recorder, Louisville, Ky., expressed fear, however, that the decision had caused irreparable damage to the progress Southern Baptists have made in recent years in promoting racial justice.

Calling the decision "incomprehensible," the Kentucky editorial said it appears the board policy is to go so far and no farther in dealing with the delicate issue of black-white relations and integration of Baptist churches. "How long can we go on appeasing prejudice for the sake of avoiding offense and for the sake of preserving an appearance of unity?" the editorial questioned.

In a "Guest Editorial" response, Sullivan denied the board had bowed to any pressures, saying "We are not seeking to avoid sensitive issues. We are seeking to treat them in a responsible and redemptive manner. . . . A glance at past, present and future materials will show that we have not in any way drawn back on our commitment to deal with the race issue."

Sullivan added that implications that the photograph was the most important element in the decision were incorrect. "It was the mix--the total combination of art, text, and approach--which led to the decision, not any single element of the combination," Sullivan said.

The Virginia Religious Herald editorial said, however, that "it is hard to comprehend how these materials could be considered 'potentially inflammatory' and 'subject to misinterpretation.'" Added the Indiana Baptist, "We cannot judge the printed matter, but if it is no more offensive than the photograph, board officials have blundered."

Both the Virginia and Texas state papers said in editorial evaluation that greater harm had been done by the decision to revise the material than would have resulted if the material had been released without revision.

An editorial in the Capitol Baptist calling the decision "unChristian and unwise" charged that "when we have compromised the truth to sell a few more quarterlies, then we don't have much more to say."

The Maryland Baptist editorial, however, expressed doubt that the decision was prompted by the desire to sell more quarterlies through offending fewer people. "The decision was more likely based on an honest effort to avoid any more controversy and criticism toward the board. Ironically, it has worked the other way."

The Illinois Baptist pointed out that in the past when the board has dealt with the race issue, some deep South churches have bundled up their literature and mailed it back to the board.

The Georgia Christian Index observed that the decision did not rank in denominational importance with the recalling of Volume I of the Broadman Bible Commentary, but lamented that "our publishing leaders seem to be so gun-shy and afraid to lead out as leaders are supposed to lead."

"We'd prefer that the board would be misunderstood because of courageous action rather than compromising retraction," said the Georgia editorial.

Several editors had suggestions for the board in the future. The Virginia Religious Herald warned that progress would not come in "adopting norms of literature geared to some hypothetical 'average.'" The editorial urged the board to recognize the diversity within the SBC.

On the other hand, the Baptist Record of Mississippi urged the board to clearly communicate to all its editors the policies of the board so they will follow policy and not allow "questionable materials" to find their way into the literature.

Noting that "no one has yet written anything on the racial issue that was not controversial," the Baptist Standard of Texas said editorially that the key question raised by the entire matter is, "What is ahead for the Sunday School Board as it deals with the racial issue?"

"We have applauded its position in recent years, and we hope that what happened to Becoming does not indicate any timidity concerning the future," the editorial said.

Concluded the North Carolina Biblical Recorder editorial: "The whole affair was poorly handled in Nashville, but Southern Baptists will survive this boner just as they have others in the past."