



News Service of the Southern Baptist Convention

---FEATURES

produced by Baptist Press

460 James Robertson Parkway
Nashville, Tennessee 37219
(615) 244-2855
W. C. Fields, Director
Robert J. O'Brien, News Editor
James Lee Young, Feature Editor

July 11, 1974

74-12

Baptist Involvement in Politics--A Few Issues?

By James Lee Young
Feature Editor, Baptist Press

ATLANTA (BP)--The need to re-evaluate church commitment to government and to define the responsibilities for redemptive activities within the political environment has seldom been more pressing.

Historically, Southern Baptist churches have taken courageous and effective, if predictable, stands on political issues that fell within narrowly defined, non-controversial perimeters: usually alcohol and gambling and, recently, pornography.

In fact, some Southern Baptists have shown considerable strength in affecting politics in such arenas. An example is the recent defeat of "liquor by-the-drink" in North Carolina, and parimutuel gambling in Texas where Baptists won major victories.

Beyond these consensus "sins," Southern Baptist churches commonly have drawn the line, excluding such issues as poverty, governmental corruption, taxes, amnesty, housing, abortion, welfare and others.

Still, observers say, there is some improvement however slow in attitudes and stances.

More recently, at the June, 1974 SBC meeting in Dallas, convention messengers easily approved a statement promoting improved race relations.

They also elected Charles King, black pastor from Frankfort, Ky., as second vice-president in a move than officials said made King the first black person elected to a national SBC office.

In another recent move, members of the Association of Southern Baptist Colleges and Schools resolved "to encourage the legitimate aspirations of women for full professional recognition" in Baptist educational institutions. They resolved also to "work to develop greater sensitivity to both overt and covert discrimination against women..." according to Baptist Press.

How often these stands will carry over into the political arena is a question yet to be resolved.

"The church shouldn't endorse a candidate," says former congressman Brooks Hays, a past Southern Baptist Convention president, "but it should be concerned with polity and moral conditioning of government itself. It has the responsibility to take a stand on issues."

Yet to do so surely exposes the pastor to charges of partisan politics. Before the 1972 presidential election, John Nichol and John Cross of Oakhurst Baptist, Decatur, Ga., both preached on corruption in government. And both were criticized as being pro-McGovern, Anti-Nixon in their sermons--although neither mentioned either candidate by name.

It's important to be aware of the opposite or minority viewpoint on all issues, says Hays.

Even more, says Hays, it's important for the church to become part of "the procedure by which policy is made; it must create an atmosphere in which incorruptible government can function."

Creating the atmosphere is, almost always, the role of the pastor, observers say. He sets the example, through church emphases and community activity, for his church members.

-more-

Yet how involved can he become without his actions being identified with his church to such a degree that personal stands are church stands?

John Claypool, the pastor of Fort Worth's Broadway Baptist Church, has drawn the fire of fellow Baptists--including members of his congregation--with his active political involvement.

While a Louisville, Ky., pastor, Claypool saw an opportunity to stand for human dignity and freedom in the civil rights movement, and marched with the late Martin Luther King Jr.--not a popular thing to do in the 60's.

The former chairman of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission spoke to racial and civil rights issues from the pulpit and "polarized" some people who felt his true role was "to evangelize."

Yet, Claypool says, other laymen who were affected by what they heard in church meetings acted "positively" toward these issues.

It's that attitude of Claypool's and dozens of others that says "the church should be involved in every phase of community life," that has led to the fledgling efforts of more and more SBC churches, to broaden the scope of their political interests and to work to influence the practices of the U.S. government.

"I see one of my roles as trying to be pastor-prophet in terms of being available for insight and perspectives," says Claypool, who is a member of Fort Worth's human relations commission.

"I see Southern Baptists as changing sociologically and our moral sensitivity has to catch up with this," he says.

But many pastors find it difficult to fully involve themselves in community life and still pastor the congregation. Time, administration and priorities are keys.

Franklin Paschall, pastor of First Baptist, Nashville, who shepherds a church of 4,000 people with a staff of about 20, has an open line to a wide range of state and local officials, including the Tennessee governor's office.

The former SBC President says he doesn't feel he can engage in active partisan politics, particularly from the pulpit. Still, he attempts to draw attention to issues, trusting that his congregation will be able to weigh the facts--as they relate to the gospel of Jesus Christ--and make their own decisions.

In Georgia, Bob Maddox is the pastor of the 600-member First Baptist, Calhoun. The city's population is about 10,000 and many of its leaders are members of the Baptist church as are a state representative and a state senator.

The idea of church political awareness came into focus for the Calhoun congregation in 1973 when Welton Gaddy, director of Christian Citizenship Development for the SBC's Christian Life Commission (CLC), Nashville, led an intensive day-long emphasis on the church and political affairs.

"The thing that Welton pointed out to us that we followed up on are the opportunities of the church, not as much as the institution but as members of the church, to respond to political issues," Maddox remembers.

"Anytime we have any kind of political issues that we're concerned about, our folks write their congressman or they communicate with the state representative or state senator.

"One of the things we were concerned about was church bingo. We just hated to see that thing get started; so, unofficially, we talked to our state senator. He voted against it and the bill in the state house was defeated."

Arson Blamed for Fire
In California Church

TUSTIN, Calif. (BP)--First Southern Baptist Church here, which has been the victim of repeated vandalism, was gutted by fire doing an estimated \$500,000 in damage, and many nearby churches stepped in to help.

The after-midnight fire raged through half of a spacious new building under construction and the older portion of the church containing an auditorium and classrooms. The damage estimate was reported in a story by the California Southern Baptist.

According to pastor Richard Shearer, fire officials judged that the fire had been set in three places. The church had been the target of vandalism for over a year and had been broken into two nights before the fire.

Nearly all the churches of the community offered use of their facilities, and nearby St. Cecilia Catholic Church took up an offering totalling \$1,504 to help the church rebuild.

John Jackson, pastor of Crescent Southern Baptist Church in Anaheim, Calif., wrote in the local associational bulletin, "I want to challenge each church to give ten Baptist Hymnals, and perhaps some churches will give chairs, bulletin boards and other teaching aids to replace those lost in this fire."

A large trailer in the church's parking lot now serves as the church office and pastor's study, which was completely destroyed. The church is meeting for its morning services in nearby Tustin High School.

-30-

Bomb Threat Vacates
Louisville Church

7/11/74

LOUISVILLE (BP)--A bomb threat interrupted the morning worship service at Walnut Street Baptist Church here where James E. Wood Jr., executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, Washington, D.C., was guest preacher.

The televised service was halted after a telephone call announced that a bomb was planted in the church. A 20-minute search revealed nothing, and the service was resumed.

Wayne Dehoney, pastor of the church, was away on vacation.

-30-

Florida Elects Hickem
To Vice-Executive Post

7/11/74

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (BP)--B.G. Hickem, pastor of First Baptist Church of Panama City, Fla., was elected assistant executive secretary of the Florida Baptist Convention, effective September 1, at a state board of missions meeting here.

A native of Royalton, Ill., Hickem is a graduate of Ouachita Baptist College, Arkadelphia, Ark., and Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville. He is a chaplain in the U.S. Army Reserve with the rank of lieutenant colonel.

Hickem pastored several churches in Arkansas before coming to Florida. Presently he is chairman of the Florida convention board of missions.

-30-