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**SBC Ethical Concepts Also
Need To Be 'Born Again'**

By Robert O'Brien

NASHVILLE (BP)--An urgent challenge to Southern Baptists revolves around whether we have a "'born again' ethic to match our 'born again' religion," a Texas denominational leader declared here in a major address to the annual meeting of the Christian Life Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC).

"The current interest in 'born again' religion is a remarkable phenomenon," said James M. Dunn of Dallas, referring to wide publicity about Democratic presidential candidate Jimmy Carter's public affirmation of his personal spiritual rebirth and his Southern Baptist affiliation.

"I hope we can generate a parallel inquiry into 'born again ethics,'" said the executive secretary of the Christian Life Commission of the two-million-member Baptist General Convention of Texas.

Dunn explored ethical challenges he sees facing the 12.7 million member SBC, "in a new day when more people know about us than ever before, people know more about us than ever before, and there is more of us for people to know about than ever before.

"Our very bigness saddles us with a fresh responsibility that is frightening," he said of the nation's largest Protestant denomination. "Beyond our sheer size, changes that have taken place among us and about us gives us an ethical charge to keep."

Dunn noted the existence of a "new day" of acceptance by Southern Baptists of "the ethical aspect of our religion," but declared that Southern Baptists must renew efforts "to make honest our protestations that the Bible is our 'sole rule for faith and practice.'"

Emphasizing that laying a biblical basis for Christian ethics "is a job that will not stay done" in the changing world scene, Dunn urged Southern Baptists to "take a fresh look at scripture and reinterpret it for our day."

If we do that seriously, he said, "the church just might rediscover its biblical identity."

Ranging into deep ethical implications of scripture, Dunn noted that it is "dangerous to accept certain biblical premises" without the willingness to act on them.

Those premises, he declared, include the truths "that faith works; that love issues in service; that Jesus is Lord; that servanthood is the Christian way; that the Kingdom of God is primary; that cross-life is for disciples . . .

"It is not far from these beliefs to an ethic which makes radical demands if one begins with a conservative view of the Bible as 'the sole rule for . . . practice, to quote our statement of Baptist Faith and Message," Dunn emphasized. "The call to faith and discipleship are the same and cannot be separated.

"Few of us would fuss with the proposition that a proper understanding of the biblical witness in human affairs has deep political consequences," he continued. "Yet, when it comes to making specific applications of the biblical ethic to particular political issues, it's not easy to be brave enough to challenge the system that buys our own big cars.

"For instance," he said, "it is difficult to sanctify avarice. In light of a biblical ethic, clearly on the side of the poor and the oppressed, how can one justify a 'trickle down' economic theory. The scriptures are uncompromising in their demand for economic justice.

"It is not hollow lip service that Baptists offer the Bible," Dunn said. "We honestly do see it as authoritative--I know I do--and many among us are willing to flock to almost anyone who will offer a string of answers from the Bible.

"Look at Bill Gothard's family ethic success, Bill Bright's evangelism, John Conlan's call to Christian citizenship and Hal Lindsey's explanation of last things," Dunn illustrated. He said approaches by the four movements offer "answers" or "solutions" that are so simple they fail to reflect the implications of the whole Bible and its ethical system.

He said they are "loosely liberal" when they refuse to take the whole Bible seriously and "cheaply conservative" when they "pander to the lowest common denominator of popular folk religion."

Elaborating in an interview after his speech, Dunn said, "I don't fail to recognize the good aspects of these extra-denominational groups, but they are no less subject to honest criticism than are Southern Baptists, who also have weaknesses. There is a need for both leaders of the denomination and outside groups to humbly accept the fact we may not be presenting the gospel in its full balance and power to bring salvation and dramatically change lives. Recognition of weaknesses is a way of hammering out application of faith and practice."

Southern Baptists are no less to blame in the area of uncritical acceptance of biblical precepts, Dunn told the Christian Life Commission members. "The time is right for Baptists who say they believe the Bible to act like it" by practicing its ethical implications.

Those ethical implications, he declared, have specific political implications. "If forgiveness has any substance, it has something to do with amnesty. If non-violence and a non-retaliatory spirit smack of the Sermon on the Mount, they also relate to gun control. If Jesus does guide our feet in the way of peace, He cares about our view of the B-1 bomber. If the Bible evidences concern for economic justice, then jobs for everyone are a high priority."

A biblical ethic, he declared, "does not have to be vague and toothless." It will offer "enough substance and direction and specificity in political decisions to get us into trouble."

"If Baptists have a distinctive doctrinal contribution, it must be our belief in the soul freedom or competence of the individual before God" (priesthood of the believer), Dunn continued.

"It is a doctrine much displayed and much distorted. Blind individualism, selfish irresponsibility, destructive divisiveness and a wishy-washy, anything-goes attitude have all been unfairly attributed to the Baptist belief in the individual's responsibility before God."

But, he said, action speaks louder than words on the priesthood of the believer. He illustrated:

"If we really believed in soul freedom, our denomination would offer a far greater place of service to lay persons. Soul freedom is a universal Christian quality. Many of them (lay persons) have taken seriously the priesthood of the believer doctrine. Women actually believe that concept applies to them. When we fail to respond, many of the brightest and best drop out or go to another denomination. They leave us not because they are less Christian, rather, because they are more Christian than we are prepared for them to be.

"If we really believed in soul freedom, our approach to ethics would be far more action oriented. Soul freedom allows great liberty for one whose relationship is directly with God. A deep belief in the priesthood of the believer lets one launch out on faith, in spite of controversy, opposition or even defeat. Conscience by consensus is hardly the Baptist way. We are free to fail. We are not free to fail to act.

"If we really believed in soul freedom, we would be far more ecumenical in spirit and in practice. Soul freedom extends to all who trust Jesus Christ as Savior and focuses upon a relationship with God far more compelling than any denominational loyalty. Soul freedom makes soul brothers and sisters of all who know Him."

Noting that social concerns issues "tend to polarize and politicize people into sharply divided camps," Dunn said such polarizations lead to unthinking insistence on absolute answers to all problems and obscure truth. "We fail to recognize that two conflicting viewpoints may be contrary without being contradictory," he declared.

He urged Southern Baptists to lead the way in maintaining a "creative tension" between seeming opposites--a technique he called the "chief way to cope with most of our dilemmas" in the modern world, from abortion and busing debates to theological and doctrinal squabbles.

"This is the hardest thing imaginable in a race of people conditioned to swing to one opposite or another," he said. "But to adopt a creative tension concept of Christian social ethics is not a cop-out . . . It doesn't have to be an attempt to take the safe middle-of-the-road position . . . To grasp a paradox and hold it in tension requires courage and wisdom."

Christian Life Com. Probing
Unifies SBC, Sullivan Says

NASHVILLE (BP)--The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) Christian Life Commission has "a vital role in bringing unity" to the SBC's agencies and churches by being "the arrow-head of advance" on critical social issues, SBC President James L. Sullivan said in a speech here.

"The convention showed real genius when forming the Christian Life Commission," Sullivan told members of the commission during a breakfast at the SBC social concerns agency's annual sessions. "You're the prophetic voice of the people--to make us think even when we are afraid to think."

Citing examples from the racial upheavals of recent years, Sullivan said, "Pioneers such as you make people think before the iron gets hot. Other SBC agencies can then be prepared when crisis hits because pioneering has been done and thought processes provoked. You're a conscience-probing agency; the others are implementing agencies."

Sullivan, who retired last year after 21 years as chief executive of the SBC Sunday School Board, illustrated his remarks by describing how the large publishing agency set about dealing with the race issue.

The board's approach, he said was to quietly, non-coercively educate people to make their own decisions in light of biblical teachings, amidst the fermenting thought processes provoked by the Christian Life Commission's overt stands. "It is an example," he declared, "of how the Christian Life Commission can work with other SBC agencies and with churches."

The Christian Life Commission "was way out front on the race issue," he said, comparing the agency to early pioneer Roger Williams' crusading for religious freedom. "You were offering resolutions, probing consciousness of people. You got most of the bullets."

Comparing the Sunday School Board to followers of Roger Williams, such as John Clarke, who "moved within the structure to nail down the freedoms Williams had pushed for," Sullivan said the board laid a long range program using a different technique from the Christian Life Commission.

But, he said, John Clarke's technique would not have worked without the stimulus provided by Roger Williams, and the board's technique would not have worked without the stimulus provided by the Christian Life Commission, which caused the SBC to confront the race issue openly in annual sessions.

"The SBC can learn lessons from seeing how this works in many areas of concern," Sullivan reiterated.

"Problems develop when you polarize issues. The Sunday School Board couldn't be on the spearhead because it might have pushed the churches into writing constitutional limits on membership. We couldn't move faster than we could bring the people with us.

"We operated on the principles laid down by two social scientists whose studies have proven change cannot be instantaneous. Their research showed it takes seven years from the time something is presented or proven true for even the first acceptance," Sullivan said. "Then it takes another seven years for general acceptance." He cited examples from several SBC mission fields which have not yielded the first convert before seven years and from the Sunday School Board's church architecture department, which has discovered, generally, that it takes a church seven years from the time it first corresponds with the department until the time it breaks ground for a new building.

"We had to lay a long range objective to do what you got the convention to state as an objective on the race issue," Sullivan said. "You laid the ground work so we could chart a course to implement what had been acted on by the convention," which passed statements on the racial issue.

He said the board applied principles of social progress to bring change without too much backlash, noting that bulldozer-type pushing fragments causes, which "social science has proven are brought about by being sucked forward from the front end, not by being pushed from behind."

Sullivan said his agency, sitting "at the fulcrum to maintain balance," emphasized the positive approach by quietly beginning to pay on the basis of job description regardless of race, establishing the first integrated industrial cafeteria in Tennessee, naming a black supervisor and educating through literature "that God created all, has a purpose for all and that Christians can do no less than to help each person--regardless of race--discover God's divine purpose."

"We were doing our job at the Sunday School Board when we got critical letters from both sides of issue," Sullivan said. "The Christian Life Commission's letters should all come from the same side. If you're not a target, you're not doing your job. You are in a delicate but necessary position."

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Baptist Missionaries
Are Back in Uganda

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SOROTI, Uganda (BP)--The three Southern Baptist missionary couples assigned to Uganda have all returned following a brief evacuation to Kenya.

The missionaries reported that churches have continued to grow and attendance is high.

They left Uganda on business and remained in Kenya until recent political tension subsided. Some of them returned within a few weeks.

Back in Uganda are Mr. and Mrs. G. Webster Carroll of West Virginia and Florida; Mr. and Mrs. Harry B. Garvin of Texas; and Mr. and Mrs. James L. Rice of Virginia.

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What's Sunday Like In
Flat Rock? Ask Mr. Hawkins

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FLAT ROCK, Ill. (BP)--Norton Hawkins, 67, a lifelong resident of this southeastern Illinois community, may hold a record among the Baptists of Illinois.

He might claim a national record. And who knows, maybe even a Guinness world record!

Here's his claim: "I've attended church every Sunday of my life, and all of those Sundays were spent right here in Flat Rock."

Hawkins, who is a member of the First Baptist Church here, was born on March 1, 1909. "It was on a Tuesday," he says, "and the very next Sunday, my mother took me to the Methodist services here in Flat Rock, and since then I've never missed a Sunday attending some church."

When told that figures up to over 3,500 successive Sundays, Hawkins replied, "Well, I never bothered to count them, but I knew it was a long time!"

One day while hitchhiking, he was struck by a car, and the accident sent him to the hospital with a broken leg. "I got hit either on a Friday or a Saturday," he recalls, "and on Sunday, the church sent a car for me and I hobbled into services on crutches. By the next Sunday, I was discharged."

Hawkins attended the Methodist church until August of 1935, when he changed to the Baptist church here. "I've been the bell-ringer at the Baptist church since 1939," he recalls, "and rang the Methodist bell for 15 years before that." He has also served as general secretary for the congregation's Sunday evening church training program for about 30 years.

When asked where he attended church on vacations, he answered, "Vacations? Why I've never had one in my life--wouldn't know one if I saw it. All my church-going has been right here in Flat Rock."

His pastor, Lyndle Taylor, in commenting on the feat, said, "Of course we don't have the records to prove his claims, but Mr. Hawkins keeps very meticulous files about his life, and we have no reason to doubt his word."

This summer, he chalked up another record. He attended, for the 38th consecutive year, the annual meeting of Palestine Baptist Association at the Mt. Olive Baptist Church near West York, Ill.

Hawkins is very civic-minded and history-conscious. On July 4 of this summer, he dressed up in an Uncle Sam suit with top hat and striped pants. "My great grandfather fought in the Revolutionary War, my grandfather in the Civil War, and my father in the Spanish-American War," he tells with pride.

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