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Christians and the Klan

Cloak of Supremacy
Under Hood of Hate

By David Wilkinson

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (BP)—The Klan is back. More than 11 decades after its birth in Pulaski, Tenn., the Ku Klux Klan of the 1980s is stirring the murky waters of racism, hoping to revive its twin philosophies of white supremacy and separation of the races in the name of "true" Americanism.

In Southern Baptist circles, some pastors and denominational workers insist that a timid or silent response on the part of the nation's largest Protestant denomination could damage the integrity of its witness and undermine its effectiveness in race relations and missions.

One of the reasons for such widespread concern is that today's "new Klan," led by better educated, more publicity-minded leaders, is packaging its old racist themes in newer, more sophisticated approaches and language.

Like the Ku Klux Klan of old, today's Hooded Order is a highly secretive, fraternal, predominantly Protestant organization which stands ready to "defend"—sometimes violently—its interpretations of Americanism and Christianity. It is deeply rooted in anti-Semitism and continues to rail against public school desegregation and other government policies related to equal rights for ethnic minorities.

But the Klan, in its quest for "respectability," also takes conservative stands on such issues as prayer in public schools, abortion, the Equal Rights Amendment, national defense, immigration and foreign aid. By addressing these issues, national Klan leaders hope to capitalize on the current mood of America, riding the pendulum of public opinion to the conservative right.

According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Ku Klux Klan had about 4,300 members in 1971. Nearly a decade later, officials of the U.S. Justice Department place Klan membership at 10,000-plus. The Community Relations Service, the mediating arm of the Justice Department, has reported a "dramatic upsurge in Klan-related activities" in the last two years.

Some of those activities have been violent. The most publicized incident occurred last November in Greensboro, N.C., when an anti-Klan march erupted in gunfire. Five persons were killed; 10 others were wounded. Six Klansmen and neo-Nazis were charged with murder.

Bill Wilkinson, Imperial Wizard of the Invisible Empire, Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, urges American whites to arm themselves for the imminent "race war."

Although the Klan's propensity for violence is frightening, many people—particularly blacks and Jews—are equally concerned about public opinion which either ignores the Klan, sympathizes with it, or indirectly supports it.

Emmanuel McCall, director of the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board's department of cooperative ministries with National Baptists says: "The fact that studies have linked KKK membership to lower economic and social strata does not eliminate the emotional, intellectual, political and economic support which is coming from middle and upper class whites. These groups merely use more refined and sophisticated ways of expressing the same racial feelings."

McCall and other Klan observers are concerned that many people in the religious community may be discounting the potential threat of the Klan with stereotyped impressions that underestimate the Hooded Order's nature and purpose.

Like the Klansman, the organization to which he—or she—belongs also defies sweeping generalizations. Klaverns differ from town to town. Despite claims of a "national organization," the Klan is poorly organized and has no single figurehead to lead the movement. Comprised of numerous splinter groups, each of which thinks of itself as the "real" Klan, the Invisible Empire's subjects often spend more energy bickering among themselves than battling their common targets—blacks, communists and Jews.

Louis Rawls, a Southern Baptist layman and former mayor of Bogalusa, La., which attracted national attention in the 1960s for its Klan activity, scoffs at the idea of an "organized" Klan. "There's nothing to it but a bunch of fellers whoopin' and hollerin' every now and then and calling themselves the Klan," he says.

In addition to lacking organization—at least at a national level—the Klan often appears to be without a common ideology.

What ideology does exist, says Tommy Tarrants, a terrorist for Mississippi's White Knights during the 1960s, ultimately relies on a "conspiratorial theory of history—a belief that the Jews are behind everything 'bad' that happens in society." Although Klansmen are anti-communist and anti-black, he says, they believe blacks are the puppets of the Jews, who are also behind communism.

Tarrants also points out that although the Klan is racist, it has always claimed to be a Christian organization, and many of its members feel they are involved in a holy cause.

Christian trappings are evident in nearly every klavern. The flaming cross—from the large variety used in cornfield rallies to the smaller version sometimes used as a Klan calling card—represents, perhaps, the Klan's most controversial Christian symbol. The Bible is also used in Klan rituals and is frequently quoted in Klan speeches. Klan chaplains are a part of many klaverns.

Interestingly, both leaders and opponents of the Klan agree that the local church will play an important role in determining the future of the Hooded Order.

Imperial Wizard Wilkinson sees the Protestant church as "one of our greatest allies. Many, many of our people are Christians. We're getting more and more ministers, too. And some of them are Baptists," he says.

Wilkinson and some of the other Klan leaders often look for emotional issues where the Klan can line up on the side of the church and the conservative community—whether or not its support is wanted.

Wilkinson, in fact, recently wrote an article for his tabloid newspaper commending the Southern Baptist Convention for its stands on abortion, homosexuality and the Equal Rights Amendment in its St. Louis meeting. "It looks like you guys are about to get back on the right track again," he added in an interview. "Maybe in a few years you'll come out for segregation."

At the opposite end of the spectrum, many minority leaders are appealing to the church for help in aggressively opposing the Klan and its ideas. Some of them feel that their white brethren, particularly pastors, have been too timid in denouncing the Klan and kindred forms of racism.

C. W. Ward, black pastor of First Baptist Church, Raleigh, N.C., believes one of the reasons for such hesitancy is that "we preach an easy gospel; we don't want to disturb anybody."

"To me," he explains, "the gospel of Jesus Christ can hurt as well as soothe. Love isn't always sweet; sometimes it's bitter. And sometimes we preach the gospel of love without preaching the gospel of the application of that love. It's the application of the gospel that gets us in trouble."

Paul Simmons, professor of Christian ethics at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and a student of racial issues, makes a similar assertion: "As Baptists, we have tended to preach a truncated gospel. We have often overemphasized salvation at the expense of separating it from ethics, from moral living as a Christian."

The Southern Baptist Convention, which is concentrated in the same geographical area as the Klan, ought to be among the leaders in addressing the issue, Simmons says.

Southern Baptist leaders, says the Home Mission Board's McCall, must express their opposition to the Klan mentality, "both as witnesses to whites in America and nationals around the world who constantly watch us, and as a way of affirming blacks in America, especially black Baptists. Failure to do this undermines the integrity of any future cooperation or relationship."

But for Christians to cope effectively with the Klan's ideas, observers believe the church must come to grips with traces of the Klan mentality within its own bloodstream. The Klan, they point out, is not the only group that marches behind the twin banners of Americanism and Christianity, waving simplistic answers to complex problems and espousing a "return to yesteryear" theme.

Beverly Tinnin, pastor of First Baptist Church, Meridian, Miss., recognizes today elements of the "same kind of hostile mentality" within some conservative segments of religion: "We can see right now in the Southern Baptist Convention a mood that is anti-intellectual, anti-educational, and anti-establishment—all rolled into one. People think the best way to deal with the problems we face is to boot out the liberals."

To resist this kind of mindset is not to abandon a conservative stand on moral issues, Simmons and others argue. "Being concerned about the Klan ideology doesn't mean you shouldn't be genuinely concerned about the way the country is going," explains ex-Klansman Tarrants. "But I think we have to help people realize that they can be concerned about issues without falling into a 'God and country' trap where they identify the interests of America with the Kingdom of God. I think it's extremely dangerous to equate political conservatism with Christianity."

But ultimately, the Hooded Order may be a vivid reminder of the fact that, in Simmons' words, "the demon of ethnocentric pride lies within each of us," even those who are followers of Christ.

The favorite slogan of Ku Klux Klan leader James Venable offers a ringing warning: "As long as there is a white man, there will be a Ku Klux Klan."

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Adapted from World Mission Journal, Oct. 1980.

David Wilkinson, associate editor of World Mission Journal, is not related to Klan leader Bill Wilkinson.

(BP) photos mailed to state Baptist newspapers by Atlanta bureau of Baptist Press.

Liberian Baptists Meet,
Fill Leadership Spots

By Mary Jane Welch

MONROVIA, Liberia (BP)—With government permission to hold their first public meeting in months, Liberian Baptists met Aug. 23 and elected a Baptist school principal as interim convention president.

Jeremiah Walker, principal of the Lott Carey Baptist Mission School in Brewerville, was elected to fill the vacancy left when William R. Tolbert Jr., former president of the convention and of the country, was assassinated in a political coup April 12.

The group also elected Samuel Hill, a deacon at Providence Baptist Church, Monrovia, where the meeting was held, as interim general secretary of the Liberia Baptist Missionary and Educational Convention, Inc.

John E. Mills, the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board's director for West Africa, sees the government's permission to hold the convention as a sign of openness which will give Baptists a "big opportunity" in the future if they stay out of politics. Because Baptist polity requires that certain decisions be made by a representative body, Baptist leaders had tried to call a convention in May and June, but failed to get permission until late July.

More than half of about 300 at the meeting were under age 35, said Pat Bellinger, Southern Baptist missionary press representative for Liberia. Many were students at the Liberia Baptist Theological Seminary, Paynesward City. Walker has been chairman of the seminary trustees since it was founded in 1976.

Financial matters left hanging by cancellation of the regular convention the week after Tolbert's death were a major consideration for the convention. Because most of the convention's operating funds are received at the annual meeting, Baptist institutions such as Ricks Institute and Kwendin Vocational Training Institute were having problems securing funds for teachers' salaries, utility bills, student food and other expenses.

Besides hearing recommendations on the future directions of Baptist programs, Baptists were able to talk with members of other churches—in many cases for the first time since the coup left the convention with many leaders dead, imprisoned or in another country, Mrs. Bellinger reported.

There was a feeling of isolation and of uncertainty during the period when the convention was not allowed to meet, she said. But the result was "an increased emphasis on prayer and a renewed faith in the power of prayer."

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Male Church Staffers
Dominant in St. Louis

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ST. LOUIS (BP)—Six out of 10 messengers to the Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting in St. Louis in June were men and almost 72 percent of those were church staff members, according to the annual messenger survey.

The survey, conducted by Martin Bradley at the Baptist Sunday School Board research services department, was based on participation of 7,753 of the 13,844 registered messengers

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at the convention, a large enough sample that "characteristics of the survey participants, then, should adequately mirror those of all messengers," he said.

Bradley said the survey results were very similar to others in recent years. For instance:

—60.2 percent of the messengers were male; 38.1 percent female; 1.7 percent not indicating either sex;

—75.7 percent came to the convention by automobile; 21.3 percent by plane;

—28.7 percent were from churches with membership of more than 1,000; 25.8 percent from 500-999; 21.5 from 300-499; the rest from churches under 300 members;

—55.1 percent spent more than \$150 to attend the convention.

The survey showed that church staff members made up almost half of the messenger total—46 percent. Since seven out of 10 of the males there were church staff members, they and their wives easily made up the majority of the messengers.

Denominational employees—missionaries, association, state convention and Southern Baptist Convention employees—combined made up less than 10 percent of the total. One motion at the St. Louis convention, soundly defeated, would have denied voting privileges to denominational employees who received as much as 50 percent of their salaries from the Cooperative Program. The motion apparently was prompted by the idea that denominational employees were controlling the convention.

Laypersons constituted 13.9 percent of the messenger total, about the same percentage as in previous years, Bradley said. A concerted effort had been made to organize laymen to attend the St. Louis convention.

More than 73 percent of the men and 63 percent of the women—a combined total of 69.4 percent—attended the Pastors' Conference that preceded the convention. By contrast, only 9.1 percent of the men and 23.0 percent of the women—a total of 14.5 percent—attended the Woman's Missionary Union convention.

Bradley said that in 1979, 26.6 percent of women attended the WMU convention and 56 percent attended the Pastors' Conference. No explanation was given for the drop in attendance at the WMU sessions. However, Bradley's figures show that only 11 percent of the wives of church staffers—the dominant group—attended the WMU meeting while 53 percent of those in home and foreign missions; 69 percent of the wives of state convention employees; and 67 percent of the wives of those in other denominational positions attended the WMU meetings.

Missouri provided 11.4 percent of the messengers while Texas sent 9.6 percent. Tennessee was third with 7.5 percent and Kentucky fourth with 7.2 percent.

The survey revealed many of the messengers had attended the previous six conventions with associational missionaries attending most consistently.

"The survey indicates we have a pretty good core of persons attending the convention each year," Bradley said.

Moral Majority Helps
Unseat Baptist Minister

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (BP)--Rep. John H. Buchanan, R-Ala., the only Southern Baptist minister in Congress and one of its most respected members, lost his bid for reelection, largely due to the efforts of Moral Majority, a fundamentalist political organization headed by Jerry Falwell.

Propelled by the active support of 2,500 volunteers, Albert Lee Smith, also a Southern Baptist, captured more than 25,000 votes to Buchanan's 20,691 in the Republican primary to earn the right to face Democrat Pete Clifford in the November general election.

Buchanan was one of numerous incumbents—primarily Democrats—targeted for defeat this year by Moral Majority on the basis of what they considered an unacceptable voting record in key moral issues.

He scored only a 29 percent morality rating on a system produced by Christian Voice, another right-leaning organization dedicated to the election of persons who support issues as represented in the Republican party platform.

Among the votes that cost Buchanan points in the Christian Voice Index were a "no" vote on an amendment to end economic sanctions against Zimbabwe-Rhodesia and a "yes" vote to establish the new Department of Education.

Buchanan said Moral Majority's effort was the decisive element in the campaign. "Moral Majority had a rally in my district the Monday before election day. They were not endorsing candidates but Jerry Falwell used the occasion to hold me up as a negative example."

Moral Majority contends that it does not endorse specific candidates, a claim disputed by Buchanan. Falwell said on National Public Radio following the National Affairs Briefing in Dallas that "It would be extremely difficult to be a Bible-believing Christian and support the Democratic Platform."

"It is a play on words," Buchanan said. "They campaigned vigorously against me and my record while upholding my friend and challenger as an example of pure virtue. That may not be an endorsement, but I would say it has some elements of one in an election year."

While acknowledging that there were efforts by his opponents to portray him as "immoral" and "unChristian," Buchanan insisted the primary factor in the election was Moral Majority's ability to turn out a big vote for Smith through a well-organized door-to-door campaign.

"It made the difference," agreed Terry Apple, Buchanan's top aide. "We got 50 percent more votes than we thought we needed to win and we still got beat. We thought the maximum turnout would be about 25,000."

"These people were highly motivated," Buchanan said, "because they had been led to believe that this is a crusade for the Lord."

Buchanan, who was formerly pastor of churches in Tennessee, Virginia and Alabama, was seeking his ninth term as representative for Alabama's sixth district. He had survived previous tough primaries, including a challenge from Smith two years ago.

In his 16-year career, Buchanan developed a reputation in the House of Representatives as a proponent of civil rights, human rights and efforts to solve world hunger. He does not like the Christian Voice approach to evaluating morality.

"When one wing of Christendom seeks to impose its right wing views on everybody else and then twists those views into moral principles for judging everybody else's Christianity, those efforts are misguided and a heresy," he said. "Christ makes Christians, political positions do not."

Buchanan also warned that Baptists need to awaken to the danger in powerful, organized groups judging a person's Christianity on the basis of how liberal or conservative he votes.

"If we Baptists believe in separation of church and state, if we believe in religious freedom, and if we believe in the priesthood of the believer, we had better stand up and be counted," Buchanan said. "I'm not the only target or even the primary target this year."

The veteran lawmaker said he didn't think Moral Majority and similar groups can duplicate their success on a national basis, but warned, "They can duplicate it in enough places to have an impact on national elections and in some congressional races."

Although he has not settled on plans for the future, Buchanan is not worried.

"I'm sure the Lord will provide an opportunity," he told Baptist Press. "My wife is the music director and I teach a Bible class at Riverside Baptist Church (in Washington). We are Baptist believers and know that the Lord can provide for our needs."

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Stassen Urges Pressure For
Nuclear Arms Reduction

By Stan Hastey

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LOUISVILLE, Ky. (BP)--A leading Southern Baptist expert on defense and nuclear arms says Christians need to pressure the U.S. government to begin immediate negotiations with the Soviet Union to avoid a potentially disastrous cruise missile race between the two superpowers.

Glen Stassen, professor of Christian ethics at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, returned from a recent international peacemaking conference convinced that the "most crucial current arms control issue" is mutual agreement between the United States and the USSR to abandon plans to create a new breed of land and sea-based cruise missiles which are easily hidden because of their small size.

That kind of agreement is achievable, Stassen said, and could help the two nations "get away from confrontation and back to peacemaking."

Stassen, trained as a nuclear physicist and a former fellow at Harvard University's Center for International Affairs, was one of six U.S. representatives at the annual meeting of the Christian Council on Approaches to Defense and Disarmament in Friedewald, West Germany. Government and private sectors from eight nations were represented by the 32 Christian participants. Stassen was the only Baptist invited.

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Among government officials present were representatives from several of the nations' defense and foreign ministries and some ambassadors. According to Stassen, who participated in the event for the second time, the group's primary concern is "how to relate the Christian faith to issues of defense and disarmament."

The group has produced the International Institute for Strategic Studies, a London-based think tank described by Stassen as the "most authoritative source of information" on military hardware.

The Christian Council recently addressed the need for unity in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the crises in Afghanistan and Iran and what Stassen called a "very dangerous nuclear arms buildup" in Europe. Some European participants criticized the U.S. over what they saw as "overreaction" to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the hostage situation in Iran. The group was also convinced that the U.S. is "dragging its feet" on arms limitation.

Noting that at present no arms control discussions between the U.S. and the Soviet Union are taking place, Stassen said the problem is the "political and spiritual atmosphere" in the United States. "Christians need to push our government to start negotiations right away," he said, including pressuring all three major presidential candidates to discuss disarmament matters.

Explaining the crucial nature of the cruise missile, Stassen said that previous arms agreements between the U.S. and USSR were verifiable because all missiles built were visible to spy planes or subject to discovery through other intelligence methods. Cruise missiles, he said, are much smaller, with some no longer than 20 feet, and can be easily concealed.

NATO nations agreed to begin research and development on the land and sea-launched cruise missile in December 1979 after the Russians began building a new missile of their own, the highly destructive SS20, with a range sufficient to reach the whole of western Europe. The alliance of western nations also agreed to have the U.S. build a new ballistic missile, the Pershing II, with a range from western Europe to the Soviet Union.

According to the Christian Council, the danger of the cruise missile is that it will signal to the Russians a new day of arms buildups with a new breed of nuclear weapon which cannot be counted. Cruise missiles are relatively inexpensive, Stassen noted, adding to the danger of their proliferation.

The SALT II treaty between the U.S. and USSR, currently stalled in the U.S. Senate, includes in its protocol a ban on the deployment of both land and sea-based cruise missiles, although it does not prohibit their construction.

Stassen, who advocates mutual reductions of arms rather than unilateral disarmament, has repeatedly urged ratification of SALT II so that a new round of discussions might begin to seek actual reductions in nuclear arms. What most concerns him, he says, is a "stable balance to reduce the likelihood that either side would be tempted to start a nuclear war."