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Denominational Controversies Linked To Geographical Growth

By James Lee Young

CHARLESTON, S.C. (BP)--Present controversies in Southern Baptist life that have centered around charges of liberalism in the denomination, and on scriptural authority and biblical inerrancy are related to the geographic expansion of the now 13.8 million-member SBC, a church historian says.

Southern Baptists must be aware that the rapid expansion and growth of the Southern Baptist Convention--now covering all 50 states--over the past 137 years means more than just geographical boundaries, said H. Leon McBeth, chairman of the church history department for Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas.

"Many people assume that expansion means just more of the same," McBeth noted, "but expansion has modified our emphases so that we have new diversities that are cultural and yet deeper than dialect." McBeth, speaking at the joint annual meeting of the SBC's Historical Commission and Historical Society at the 300-year-old First Baptist Church of Charleston, S.C., called the geographical expansion "healthy."

He said such growth requires paying the price of increased diversity, thus, an increase in tension such as experienced in the denomination's life in the past few years.

McBeth, chairman of the Historical Commission, charged that Landmarkism--a 19th century movement that viewed Baptists in a light of successionism from New Testament times and the early church to the exclusion of other denominations--"has provided the seedbed, the militant spirit, and some of the views of the theological controversies confronting Southern Baptists in the 20th century."

"Elevating doctrinal differences to crisis levels, refusal to accept as brethren those who differ, elevating minor issues to major importance, and the driving need to create a chasm between 'them' and 'us,' all too familiar in Southern Baptist history, have their counterparts in recent old Landmarkism," McBeth said.

McBeth claimed that some early centers of Landmarkism have become centers of the more recent controversy, including Dallas, Memphis, Tenn., and California, among others.

An "old Landmark emphasis" on the local church, to the exclusion of the denomination and its missionary agencies, "lives today in the 'de facto' independence of some SBC superchurches," McBeth claimed.

Even the Landmark tenet of Baptist successionism has surfaced in the contemporary controversies in Southern Baptist life, McBeth noted. He added that in his view it would be difficult to account for current controversies apart from the "residue of Landmarkism."

However, McBeth cautioned that factors tending to weaken his hypothesis "are the tendency of some Southern Baptists identified with the present theological controversy to practice at least 'de facto' open communion, accept alien immersion, and cooperate in religious and non-political endeavors with non-Baptists."

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McBeth noted that what has happened to Southern Baptists "is not unlike what has happened to the nation. Just as today's nation of 50 states differs from the colonial nation of 13 states, so today's nationwide SBC differs from the 1845 version which was limited to a few states of the old South."

"Those two stories of territorial expansion--one political and the other, ecclesiastical--show remarkable similarity. Whether the convention can cope better with growing pains than has the nation remains to be seen," McBeth said.

In his address, McBeth traced the expansion of Southern Baptists through the end of the "comity" agreement with Northern Baptists, in which each agreed to respect the territorial rights of the other. But he cited that denominational agreements on the national level did not stop the flow of Baptists from the South into areas recognized as Northern Baptist territory. Southerners were either made to or at least did feel uncomfortable with different worship and practices of the northerners, McBeth said, and elected to begin their own congregations, eventually seeking affiliation and fellowship with those of their own kind.

Much of the difference came in the guise of differences over "open communion, alien immersion, and unitarianism as equally objectionable doctrines."

McBeth, quoting another Southern Baptist historian, Robert A. Baker, cited that two basic, underlying themes accompany SBC territorial growth--the migration of Southern Baptist peoples into new areas and their dissatisfaction with Northern Baptist churches.

"Other issues may be present, but those issues are never absent," McBeth said.

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Baylor Conference Explores
Public, Private Morality

By Nancy Barcus

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WACO, Texas (BP)--A "split personality" in American religion is at the core of many church-state controversies, according to a leading American historian.

Henry Steele Commager, who spoke at a Baylor University conference on religion and politics in the 1980s, said America's founders upheld two attitudes toward religion which today have lost their balance and produced deep moral confusion.

The attitudes--an evangelical fervor leading to "private virtue" and enlightened reason which stresses "public morality"--remained in balance until pious believers supported such unjust public practices as slavery, Commager said.

The resulting "double standard of morality," which is still a problem, is based on the notion that "only the private sins are reprehensible in the sight of God, not the public (sins)," he said.

"This misconception has seduced us into tolerance of deep and widespread social injustices and inequities. It permits us to indulge in insensate hatred of other nations and peoples," he warned.

Current church-state controversies often come from "New Right" supporters of "private virtue," Commager noted, adding that the Moral Majority is more interested in "private vice" than in "public sin." The emphasis on "sins of the flesh" distracts them from the serious moral issues of the times, he charged.

"If the Moral Majority were to enact every one of its goals into law, society would not change an iota, nor would the economy, nor science, nor even religion," he said.

Lobbyists who seek to enforce "private virtues" have caused complex legal cases which the U.S. Supreme Court would prefer to avoid, Charles M. Whelan, a Jesuit legal specialist from Fordham Law School in New York City, told the conference participants.

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When churches enter politics through, they will find odds are good that they "stand on no higher constitutional ground than businesses, labor unions and non-religious charitable organizations," especially on the issue of tax exemption, or registration and reporting requirements for lobbyists, Whelan said. Nor is it likely they will be entitled to the same treatment as political parties.

The actual political success of New Right pressure groups was questioned at the conference by Richard Pierard, professor of history at Indiana State University. He said voters who "turned Right" in the recent presidential election were expressing their "desire for a more assertive America on the world scene" and a solution to domestic inflation, rather than approval of New Right platforms.

The New Right merely rode an existing tide, he said. Today, polls show that "too close an identification" with the Moral Majority is "negative" for a candidate, he said.

U.S. Rep. Jack Hightower, D-Texas, said Moral Majority's opposition helps. Told he was once on a Moral Majority "hit list," he said he "still tells people he is on the list."

"I know those people in the Texas Panhandle," he said of his constituents. "I don't need somebody from a lobby group to tell me what the people in my district know." He said he pays more attention to individual hand-written notes than to mail-outs in large quantities from lobby groups. New Right organizations in the District of Columbia "have not been considered too credible by a lot of us in Washington," he said.

A leader of People for the American Way, a group formed to oppose the Moral Majority, called the New Right religious groups "basically liberal theologically in their interpretation of Scripture." The Moral Majority's view of U.S. citizens as God's "chosen people" and their attitude toward gaining wealth are suspect, warned Charles V. Bergstrom, executive director of governmental affairs for the Lutheran Council, USA.

The goal of religious activity should be social justice, not enforced morality, he said. He urged "ministry of advocacy on behalf of justice, especially for the poor and oppressed." Such activity "carries more power than any that may glitter self-righteously under the glare of television lights," he said.

James E. Wood Jr., director of Baylor's church-state studies program which sponsored the conference, said, historically, churches have often withdrawn from the world, seeing it as "inherently and irretrievably evil." Or, churches have accommodated the culture and power structures of the state, a "far greater scandal in the history of the church." More appropriate, he said, is church interaction with the world, fulfilling the role of a "prophetic community."

Phil D. Strickland, director of the Christian Life Commission of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, said the church must articulate a "public theology," and that it often has placed "profits above people, or programs above people." The church must "resist the temptation to sell its prophetic role for temporary power," he said. "It will refuse to be bought off by favors from the state, such as tax credits."

Ruth L. Harvey, vice president of the National Association of Black Women Attorneys from Danville, Va., said, "We must face up to the fact that pious words without concrete action is truly 'sounding brass and tinkling cymbals.' Just as the black church has been the pusher in the human rights struggle, the white church has been the resister."

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(BP) photos mailed to state Baptist newspapers by Baylor University.

Golden Gate Seminary
To Offer Ph.D Degree

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MILL VALLEY, Calif. (BP)--Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary will begin offering a doctor of philosophy degree (Ph.D.) this Fall.

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W. Morgan Patterson, dean of academic affairs, said the new degree will be offered in biblical studies and historical-theological studies.

According to William L. Hendricks, director of Ph.D. studies, the degree program will require the completion of 40 hours of advanced study credits beyond a master of divinity or equivalent degree. A dissertation also will be required.

The program has been accredited by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges.

Limited teaching fellowships and research grants are available to qualified applicants. Assistance will be given to students in finding appropriate housing.

The Study Committee includes Patterson, with responsibilities in the historical field of study; Francis M. DuBose, professor of missions and director of the World Mission, responsible for history of missions; J. Kenneth Eakins, associate dean of academic affairs and professor of archaeology and Old Testament interpretation, in charge of the biblical field; and Hendricks, professor of systematic theology and philosophy of religion, responsible for the theological field.

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Black Student Elected
To Head SEBTS Council

By Rod Byard

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WAKE FOREST, N.C. (BP)—Ronald Bernard Wilkins of Winston-Salem, N. C., has become the first black elected student council president at any of the six Southern Baptist Convention seminaries.

Wilkins, a second year student working toward a masters' degree in religious education, won a runoff election at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary.

"The race issue never came up (during the election)," Wilkins said. "I think it says something for the students," he added. "They looked beyond what people look like."

He believes he was elected "because the students wanted some issues addressed, and I addressed them"

In the campaign at the 1,400-student seminary, Wilkins called for more student preaching in chapel services, more academic dialogue outside the classroom, more involvement of the students in the seminary planning process, and better communications when someone is sick or during other emergencies.

Wilkins, physically impressive at 6'3 1/2" and 280 pounds, is elated over the campus election, which he feels "says something about Southern Baptists, who often have been seen by some as racist and prejudiced."

Since Southeastern is a Southern Baptist school, "nearly all my fellow students are Southern Baptist. The fact that I'm black made no difference to them, Wikins says.

An interesting coincidence, Wilkins observes, is that his election came in a year when his black Baptist Convention and the white Baptist State Convention of North Carolina are jointly sponsoring an evangelistic emphasis titled "Here's Hope." "Well," Wilkins said, "the election of a black by a predominately white student body shows there really is hope."

Southeastern, one of the six SBC seminaries which together have an enrollment of more than 10,000 students, is open to persons of all races and denominational affiliations.

Although Wilkins has been licensed to preach by Morning Star Baptist Church in Winston-Salem, he makes a 100-mile trip home every weekend to work with the Salvation Army, a group with whom he has been involved since he was 14 years old.

For Wilkins, 1979 graduate of Lenoir-Rhyne College in Hickory, education is more than a desire, it's a necessity. To get through college, he had to "scramble" and work to earn his way. "But that's all right," he said, "I've got energy."

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After completing seminary, Wilkins would like to get together with some churches "who are having problems with Christian education" and work with them as a consultant, to get their programs established.

He's one of seven children of Wilbert Wilkins of New York City and Naomi Wilkins of Winston-Salem. He has a twin brother, Donald.

He said he felt the call into Christian ministry "when I was six and that call has been sustained. I feel the need to help people. I know how a church should be run--it should be Christ-centered rather than preacher-centered--and I know I would be good at it. I enjoy helping people and I try to love everybody."

For now, Wilkins aims to be "the kind of person my fellow students voted for when they looked beyond what I look like."

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Costa Rican Baptist Pastor
Named Ambassador To Israel

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SAN JOSE, Costa Rica (BP)--Adrian Gonzales, pastor of First Baptist Church, San Jose, Costa Rica, has been named Costa Rica's ambassador to Israel.

His appointment was made by Costa Rica's newly elected president, Alberto Monge, who will be inaugurated May 8.

Gonzales has been pastor of First Baptist Church or its missions for the past 30 years, according to Southern Baptist Missionary Bobbye Compton. Compton, from North Carolina, will succeed Gonzalez as pastor of the 38-year-old congregation.

The missionary will be formally installed as pastor May 23.

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Preacher Brother in Brazil
Helps Wed Couple by Phone

Baptist Press
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BROUSSARD, La. (BP)--When Todd Keller and Trina Falgout told each other "I do," in Louisiana, the preacher who asked if they did was in Brazil.

Keller and Falgout were married in Broussard's First Baptist Church April 24 while Keller's brother, Wayne, assisted by telephone from Salvadore, Brazil, where he is a Southern Baptist missionary.

Shadrack Brooks, pastor of Parkerson Avenue Baptist Church, Crowley, La., where the bride is a member, was the co-minister who led the final vows and signed the marriage certificate.

"Todd wanted Wayne, the only minister in the family, to perform the ceremony and have the family present, but Wayne couldn't leave Brazil," explained Kenny Keller, another brother to the groom. "So we checked telephone rates and found they were not too high. Plans were made so Wayne would be at the phone when we called him."

A telephone was hooked into the church's amplifier and a telephone receiver was mounted on a stand. The couple's voices were picked up from the telephone receiver so Wayne could hear them reply to his questions. Those in the auditorium could hear Wayne from the amplifier.

Kenny said the ceremony was normal until time for the vows and the call was placed to Wayne, who spent about five minutes in performing the vows on the telephone.

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