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Tradition, Conscience
Affirmed At Workshop

By Dan Martin

WASHINGTON (BP)--The "twin wings" of tradition and conscience in Baptist life were examined, affirmed and authenticated during a two-day workshop on Baptist identity.

The conference, sponsored by the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, took a long look at Baptist heritage, from the first Baptist dissenters in Seventeenth Century England to today and affirmed the basic principles of soul liberty, conversion, religious liberty and separation of church and state.

Along the way, participants looked at their own individual heritages, studied ethical and legal implications and pondered tradition and conscience in their personal, local, national and international ramifications.

A Harvard theologian spoke of conversion and the tension which should exist between church and society; a law expert reviewed recent Supreme Court decisions impacting religious liberty and an ethicist talked of soul liberty and the differing opinions today.

Two historians traced Baptist history--one from Anabaptist antecedents and the other from the Puritans--and a nationally known television newsman shared his personal odyssey.

Bill Moyers, award winning broadcast journalist with CBS News, quoted a statement "that tradition and conscience are the twin wings given to the human soul to reach for the truth," as he told of his experiences growing up in Marshall, Texas, attending Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, Texas, serving in the Senate and White House with Lyndon B. Johnson, and now as a nationally known commentator.

Moyers spoke of gratitude for Baptist influences of history and on his own life, citing a litany of things he learned in a Baptist church: democracy, equality of individuals, inviolability of the conscience, learning to listen, commitment and caring.

"But religion also is a record of schisms, heresies, lunacies, hypocracies, compromises, crime, controversies, division and ignorance. I also learned about all of these things in a Baptist church," he said, adding the "ugly things that happened in my Baptist church actually kindled my faith in democratic possibilities."

Harvard theologian, Harvey Cox, spoke of conversion and said the Baptist emphasis on personal conversion "somehow makes us different from the world." Encapsulated in that notion, he said, "is a very sophisticated view of human nature and human history.

"If we can be born again, we can change; and if we can change, then human nature is not determined," he said, disputing the contention of international politicians, psychiatrists and others that things are preordained.

Cox claimed conversion, "the Baptist experience of God through Jesus Christ, arises from a tension with regnant values of the world," noting when the distinctives between Christians and the world begin to blur, the tension slips away and conversion lessens in importance. "In other words, when we are at ease in Zion, then conversion is endangered for what do we have to be converted from? What do we have to be converted to?"

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He added Baptists "have always been at our best when characterized by a resistance to outrage" and urged participants to work at "reviving that tension between being a Baptist and the rest of the world."

Foy D. Valentine, executive director of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission, warned perhaps no other denominational group in America more accurately reflects the subcultures within which they work than do Baptists.

"A lot of our Baptist pulpits during political elections sound ominously like the Republican Party gathered for prayer," he observed.

Valentine warned too many Baptist pastors have lost their prophetic role because they have become captives of American culture. "It is a fearful thing that much of the current moral outrage regarding the great social and moral evils of our day have been registered by journalists, jurists, editors and lawyers rather than by the people of God in general and Baptists in particular," he said.

Law professor A.E. Dick Howard told participants the U.S. Supreme Court has "backpedaled" from a strict interpretation of church-state separation to a more fluid stance.

Howard, professor of law at the University of Virginia and often mentioned in speculation as a potential Supreme Court nominee, commented on the decision upholding the Internal Revenue Service's revocation of Bob Jones University's tax-exempt status for racial bias in its admissions policy.

The court held that the elimination of racial bias from the whole of society is sufficiently important "public policy" to deny tax exemption to a religious institution basing its biased practices on religious conventions. Howard said while he did not object to the result in the Bob Jones case, "I'm not comfortable with the reasoning."

Another attorney, Earl Trent, general counsel for the American Baptist Churches' Board of National Ministries, disagreed with Howard on the ruling.

Trent, a black, said even though Baptists might not agree with the stand of Bob Jones University, they should support the right of the group to dissent and object when court rulings trample on their right to be true to their own belief.

W.R. Estep Jr., professor at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, said for Baptists "freedom is inherent within the gospel itself. Therefore, the demand for freedom is not assumed for a stance of religious indifference or neutrality, but from a concern for authentic Christianity, for which a freedom to proclaim the gospel and the freedom either to accept or reject that witness without fear of legal reprisals are the essential ingredients."

Some Baptists, he said "have had difficulty balancing the divine compulsion to share the Good News," and "the rejection of all forms of coercion in seeking a positive response."

In response to a question, Estep said proposals to restore state-sponsored prayer in the public schools were "utterly against" the Baptist idea of religious liberty and raise more problems "than chiggers in a blackberry patch."

Stephen Brachlow, associate professor of church history at North American Baptist Seminary in Sioux Falls, S.D., said early Baptists were a "powerless persecuted people" who issued "eloquent pleas for unrestricted religious freedom.

"If we are to be true to our heritage, we need continually to rediscover a deep sense of compassion and a solidarity with the powerless, persecuted people of this world," Brachlow said. There is, however, he said "a subtle temptation to move away from identification with the powerless once we find ourselves in a position of prominence, once we are in league with the powerful.

"As a majority religious movement in America today, I pray that we will not lose sight of that particular identity which is ours to preserve," he added.

Three Pastors Present
Views On Millennium

By Linda Lawson

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP)--Southern Baptist pastors gave differing views on the millennium--events surrounding the second coming of Jesus Christ as interpreted primarily in the book of Revelation--but affirmed a common belief Jesus will return to earth at the end of time.

A two-day Millennial Consultation was held for 140 employees of the Baptist Sunday School Board to hear differing views commonly held by Southern Baptists.

The pastors who presented papers on their views were Hal Brooks, pastor of Southcliff Baptist Church, Fort Worth, Texas, historical premillennialism; Ralph Smith, pastor of Hyde Park Baptist Church, Austin, Texas, dispensational premillennialism, and John McClanahan, pastor of First Baptist Church, Pine Bluff, Ark., amillennialism.

"The purpose of the consultation was to sharpen and broaden our perception of the millennium at some points," said Morton Rose, vice president for church programs and services at the board.

After the consultation, Rose said editorial guidelines for church literature and convention press materials will be evaluated. Guidelines on doctrine and biblical interpretation currently specify clear support to basic Christian and Baptist beliefs is to be given and differing points of view among Southern Baptists are to be dealt with factually and fairly.

Brooks said, "The historical premillennial method interprets Revelation largely as a prophesy of future events depicted in symbolic terms which lead up to and accompany the end of the world." Noting any symbol in Revelation has behind it real meaning, he said, "It is my conviction the one thousand years (referred to in Revelation as the Millennium) is a symbolic term of absolute completion."

However, Brooks emphasized, "Whether the one thousand years is a literal or a symbolic figure is not really the issue. The vital key is the kingdom of Christ will come upon this earth in all of its fulness so every knee shall bow and every tongue confess he is truly Lord of Lords and King of Kings."

He described the book of Revelation as a "mission manual of challenge for the church to achieve her mission in a hostile world until the grand climax of the end, the coming of Christ."

Brooks cited the need for all Christians to be prepared for the return of Christ. "Whatever our view, I believe this would be one of our major thrusts," he noted.

Smith said the most important factor in his belief in dispensational premillennialism is Bible prophecy is literally fulfilled. "If all of these prophecies were literally fulfilled regarding Christ's first advent, it is not reasonable to assume the promises regarding his second advent will also be literally fulfilled?" he asked.

Other factors Smith cited for his belief were: he interprets the entire Bible as literally true, the Old Testament expectation is the Messiah will reign on earth over Israel, the early church believed in the millennial reign of Christ upon the earth and early church fathers held to a premillennial belief.

Listing similarities and differences in the three views, Smith said the differences "are not as marked or as important as the similarities."

As the same time, Smith said his literal interpretation of the Bible, including the millennium, has a strong impact on his ministry as a pastor. "When a preacher interprets the Bible literally, I believe he has more power in his preaching," Smith said.

McClanahan said the amillennial position "views the millennium in spiritual terms rather than in literal terms. The amillennial view puts a stronger emphasis on what God has already done in Jesus Christ," he noted.

"The amillennial viewpoint should have a direct bearing on Christian actions and attitudes in the vital areas of mission, evangelism, ministry and Christian living in general," said McClanahan. "The amillennial position should be a strong theological support for Bold Mission Thrust."

Of the similarities of the three views, McClanahan said, "We all take the Bible very seriously. We recognize the Bible to be God's authentic, authoritative word to us."

The three also agreed they share similar views on the sovereignty of God, the need of people for Jesus Christ as Savior, the future return of Christ, judgment of the lost and saved, a literal hell and literal heaven and the triumph of God in history.

In a discussion on implementing editorial guidelines in regard to the millennium, McClanahan recommended including in a Sunday school unit on Revelation a lesson on the millennium in which the three views are presented.

Brooks said he would like to see "more emphasis on the rule of God and the lordship of Christ. The rule of God on a man or woman's life would enable him or her to be prepared for the Lord's return and to see God is in control of history."

Smith said Sunday School Board publications will not cause problems as long as writers and editors present what the Bible says and explain their interpretations. "Where you could get in trouble would be to say the Bible says one thing but the truth is another," he said.

"What I read (of Sunday School Board literature) has gotten infinitely better in recent years even though it's always been good," said Smith.

Rose said the consultation was an opportunity to examine the differences and similarities of the views "to enable board personnel to become more responsive to needs of all Southern Baptists."

Similar conferences for interested Southern Baptists were sponsored by the board in 1971 in Dallas, Texas, and 1975 at Ridgecrest (N.C.) Baptist Conference Center.

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Marines Dig Into Study
Of Biblical Geography

By Lee Hollaway

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BEIRUT, Lebanon (BP)--Getting too close to your subject matter can be hazardous to your health, a group of U.S. military personnel discovered in Lebanon this summer.

Little bits of biblical geography kept flying through the air as the class of 10 Marines and naval personnel struggled to complete a seminary extension course on that subject.

When the classes began in July, they met on a regular schedule but then conditions began to change. "Classes were repeatedly interrupted due to the constant shelling and rocket bursts," said Chaplain Danny G. Wheeler, who led the study.

Wheeler finally encouraged his students, all part of the U.S. peace-keeping force in Beirut to continue their studies and complete the course on their own. He met with them individually to collect assignments and administer tests.

Keeping their minds on their studies apparently helped keep them from thinking too much about the hazards because, "The course helped keep our morale up in a meaningful way," Wheeler said.

When all 10 finished the course in September, Wheeler wrote the Seminary Extension Department in Nashville, Tenn.: "I am proud to say all my students completed the course with better than satisfactory results, even under fire."

Seminary Extension is a ministry education system of the Seminary External Education Division, jointly sponsored by all six Southern Baptist seminaries.

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Luther Rice Promoted
Theological Education Too

By Lonnie Wilkey

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP)--Southern Baptists are celebrating the 200th anniversary of the birth of Luther Rice without an appreciation for one of his greatest visions, says the executive director/treasurer of the Southern Baptist Convention Education Commission.

Arthur L. Walker Jr. was in Washington recently to attend the Luther Rice Consultation on World Missions. While not criticizing the program, he noted it was ironic no emphasis was given to Rice's beliefs in college education.

"Just as Luther Rice's contemporaries failed to understand and appreciate his vision concerning the importance of college education, so do Southern Baptists today," Walker said.

Walker noted Rice was a pioneer in that he recognized Baptists needed their own educational system. He knew it was not enough to add a few training experiences on top of education that came through another system.

According to Evelyn Wingo Thompson's biography on Rice, "he saw, as no other Baptist of his day was equipped to see, that Baptist churches were springing up all over the western states and that without trained leadership their foundations were on shifting sands."

Rice envisioned a national Baptist educational institution where future Baptist leaders could be trained and founded Columbian College in Washington, D.C. in 1821. Walker noted Rice received some of his greatest criticism because he spent so much time in promoting the school and education. Eventually the school he founded and gave so much of his life to was sold to the Roman Catholics and is today George Washington University.

Rice's beliefs and efforts were not completely in vain. His influence was instrumental in the founding of the early Southern Baptist institutions including Furman University in South Carolina, Georgetown College in Kentucky, the University of Richmond in Virginia and Mercer University in Georgia.

Despite his efforts, however, the importance of college education in training those interested in church-related and mission vocations is still overlooked.

"It is a tragedy that in 200 years Baptists have not learned the lesson Luther Rice tried to teach us. You cannot effectively witness to the world until you have properly educated your messengers," Walker said.