

**(BP)**

News Service of the Southern Baptist Convention

**-- FEATURES**  
produced by Baptist Press

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May 31, 1984

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BJCPA

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Dunn Answers Questions  
About Joint Committee

WASHINGTON (BP)—Southern Baptists, like the rest of the nation, have struggled with religious liberty issues in recent years. Caught in the crossfire of that struggle has been the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs and its executive director, James M. Dunn. In an interview, Dunn responded to many of the questions raised by those who object to the role played by the Baptist Joint Committee during the religious liberty debates.

The interview was conducted by Bobby S. Terry, editor of Word and Way, newsjournal of the Missouri Baptist Convention.

It is presented in question and answer format in order to present Dunn's comments as clearly as possible.

TERRY: What is the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs?

DUNN: The Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs (BJCPA) is a Washington-based arm of nine major Baptist conventions and conferences in North America which focuses attention on its common commitment to religious liberty and its corollary of church-state separation. The BJCPA functions as a service agency in the nation's capital.

TERRY: Why has the Baptist Joint Committee become the center of controversy among Southern Baptists in recent years?

DUNN: For two principal reasons. First, religious liberty and church-state separation have never received more national attention than in the last three years. That is just documentable—school prayer; tuition tax credit; the constitutional convention; court stripping, which is the removal of the jurisdiction of federal courts from certain religious and civil liberty issues; an ambassador to the Roman Catholic Church. Emotional and controversial court cases such as the issue of tax exemption for church-related schools were brought to a focus in the Bob Jones case. A great deal of attention has been given to a wide range of government intrusion questions related to the Internal Revenue Service, local zoning ordinances, historical commissions, city councils and lots of others.

The other thing is the apparent erosion, or the illusion of erosion, within Southern Baptist life of their historic commitment to a very dedicated stance on church-state separation. These two major, easily documentable trends have converged.

TERRY: Your membership in People for the American Way has been a source of controversy. You have been linked to Norman Lear, the organization's most visible member. Why did you associate yourself with People for the American Way?

DUNN: In October 1980 before I came to this agency, the BJCPA board passed an official policy statement on the dangers of civil religion. The statement expressed the fear that "the current activities of the religious right may pose a more dangerous threat to the American principle of church-state separation than any previous similar movement." It called on all Baptists, together with other concerned citizens, to work for political cause and, at the same time, cautioned against judging candidates as Christian or non-Christian, moral or immoral on the basis of essentially political rankings by the religious right. Those are precisely the same goals of People for the American Way.

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The board was made up of church corporate leaders; a broad-based group of all major religious types, including Father Hesburg, president of Notre Dame University; Barbara Jordan, a black Baptist congresswoman from Texas; Ruth Carter Stapleton; Claude Hugh Broach; John Buchanan, a former congressman from Alabama who is now chairman of the board of People for the American Way; David Matthews, the former president of the University of Alabama and a Republican secretary of the old Department of Health, Education and Welfare, and a long list of others. The board brought together church leaders and corporate leaders who care about religious liberty and sat them down together on the same board. That had not been true anywhere else. The board decided deliberately from the outset to use television to counter those threatening the First Amendment. Obviously, that is why Mr. Lear was so visible.

I am not convinced that everything I do is always right. I would not say absolutely and irrevocable the judgment call to be a member of the board was correct. I am convinced that it was proper for me to know what they were doing and to participate in the activities of People for the American Way, as a citizen concerned about First Amendment issues, relating to them in the same coalition way that we relate to all the other major actors on religious liberty issues on the Washington scene.

That may sound like a bland generalization but it is not one at all. Recently, we signed a letter to the Congress, put out the letter, did the physical work in our office against an ambassador to the Roman Catholic Church, and the American Civil Liberties Union, the National Council of Churches, the Seventh Day Adventists and the National Association of Evangelicals joined us in that.

It is virtually impossible to communicate effectively or work well in a political climate without being aware of, participating in and aggressively engaging in single issues or cluster issue coalitions on those things where there is a high degree of commonality with other groups.

TERRY: One critic of the American Way described it as "pornographic smut peddlers, homosexual activists and baby-killing abortionists." How accurate is that description?

DUNN: Totally inaccurate. There has never been a position taken, a paper written or a posture assumed by People for the American Way on those issues—pornography, homosexuality or abortion. The strong Roman Catholic leadership on the board is evidence that we have not been involved in those myths of overheated rhetoric that have been injected into the criticism of People for the American Way. It simply is not true. It is not the agenda, purpose or intent and never has been.

TERRY: Are you a member of People for the American Way or do you support the organization financially?

DUNN: No to both.

TERRY: Some of your critics say that if you had not been so vocal in opposition to earlier proposals by President Reagan, you would have been more successful in opposing the appointment of the ambassador to the Vatican. How do you respond to such critics?

DUNN: It reflects a misunderstanding of how the political process works in Washington. It shows a lack of awareness of the degree to which this office led the fight in opposition to the ambassador to the Vatican and a misperception of how that process was accomplished and announced. I think it is a far-fetched criticism.

TERRY: Why has the Baptist Joint Committee been silent about abortion and other public policy issues of concern to Southern Baptists when it has been extremely vocal about religious liberty?

DUNN: Well, a simple rereading of our charter and program assignment would make it clear that our primary focus is in the religious freedom, church-state separation realm. Secondly, there are program assignments for other denominational agencies which have those other areas of abortion, peace, hunger. For Southern Baptists, it is the Christian Life Commission. It would be poor stewardship for us to do their job or them to do ours. Thirdly, the overwhelming workload I referred to earlier makes it very difficult to do justice to even the religious liberty issues.

TERRY: It has been suggested that Southern Baptists need their own lobbying group in Washington, one that would combine religious liberty concerns with issues assigned to the Christian Life Commission such as abortion, world hunger, etc. What is your reaction to that?

DUNN: Twice in the last 20 years this issue has come to the attention of the SBC Executive Committee, the full convention and then back to the Executive Committee. In both instances, Southern Baptists have overwhelmingly affirmed the present arrangement with the Joint Committee majoring on religious liberty and the Christian Life Commission majoring on the broader sweep of social issues. The last times were 1979 and 1980.

There is a substantive response as well. We are already in a very close working relationship with the Christian Life Commission. To identify the religious liberty and church-state issues, we have to read the federal register every day all the way through and the Congressional record. Since we do that, it would be silly to have that duplicated. We alert the Christian Life Commission to any and all issues that relate to their agenda. We cover, at their request, as a news service, all of those issues and feed them through Baptist Press. We make the formal request for them to testify when it is appropriate or when they request any other "shoe leather" services.

TERRY: If Southern Baptists decide that part of the funds now designated for the Baptist Joint Committee should be used to finance a separate Southern Baptist agency in Washington, what do you think would happen to the Baptist Joint Committee?

DUNN: It is difficult to know, it is so hypothetical. I can only affirm that there are a great many individuals with a passionate commitment to remain with this office. A good many churches have expressed a strong desire to see to it that we maintain the integrity and reputation for consistency and continuity on religious liberty issues and the visibility that we have in Washington. The 40 years of hard work by those who have gone before are very meaningful to a good many churches and individuals across the SBC.

TERRY: What impact would such a development have on the cause of religious liberty?

DUNN: I don't know. I could see a wide range of possibilities. Some would be very bleak. Others are very optimistic. I just can't be more specific than that because I am not a fortune teller.

TERRY: How Southern Baptist is the Baptist Joint Committee?

DUNN: In terms of staff, eight of the 10 present staff members are Southern Baptists in history, roots and involvement. It is Southern Baptist in the great volume of its work. When you take the time which is devoted to serving, writing materials for, speaking to and doing stuff for Southern Baptists, 90 percent or more of our work is done for Southern Baptists.

TERRY: Some people complain that Southern Baptists pay most of the bills for the Baptist Joint Committee but the Baptist Joint Committee doesn't reflect Southern Baptist positions. The 1982 resolution on the school prayer amendment is a case in point. How do you respond to this?

DUNN: I think the 1982 resolution on the school prayer amendment is an excellent argument for us that we do respond to Southern Baptist positions and reflect them. The 1982 resolution caused one to look at what other resolutions on that subject have been passed during the last few years. When you do that you see that nine resolutions have been passed since 1964, including the 1983 resolution that spoke against any constitutional amendment and supported the 1962 and 1963 Supreme Court decisions. The 1982 resolution was an aberration.

In 1983, we said once again the First Amendment offered adequate and sufficient guarantees for religious liberty. If that were not true, we had 10 state conventions in the fall of 1982 that explicitly or implicitly repudiated the 1982 SBC resolution.

We took the position on the amendment that Southern Baptists have repeatedly said they wanted us to take. Southern Baptists, through their state conventions at the grassroots, have reaffirmed that they wanted us to take that position also.

TERRY: In light of the overwhelming financial support coming to the Joint Committee from the Southern Baptist Convention, do you feel there are enough Southern Baptists on the trustees?

DUNN: Probably not. I inherited an awkward governing structure. One of the pluses of a serious re-evaluation is that we may, in fact, by scrubbing the present representation system and starting over, get a more balanced representation that more accurately reflects the fiscal support for the agency.

A very prominent South Carolina Baptist leader said the importance of a Baptist witness in the nation's capital is significant enough that if we had to pay other groups to let us use their names, we probably should do so. He is convinced, as I think a good many are, that the "jointness" of the Joint Committee is a very important value in itself. Being biggest carries with it some responsibilities, bigness of spirit, not just bigness of budget.

TERRY: Are Southern Baptists getting their money's worth from the Baptist Joint Committee?

DUNN: I am convinced they are getting one of the biggest bargains that they get anywhere in the country for what they put into the Baptist Joint Committee. If you simply want to look at it dollar-wise, the revision of the pension reform act, the ERISA legislation, saved the Annuity Board annually, more than our budget every year. That says nothing of the ultimate savings to the retirees who benefit from the Annuity Board's savings.

The overseas-earned income is a problem related to the Foreign Mission Board where we had foreign missionaries literally having to pay double taxation—once in each country. (R.) Keith Parks (FMB president) estimated a savings for the Foreign Mission Board of a million dollars a year. The second phase of that legislation almost slipped through Congress without public attention and, unless we had been here monitoring it and caught it, it would have.

So, yes, I think if you look at issue advocacy, services to the denomination on matters that affect us in our pocketbook or news reporting, they get their money's worth out of the Joint Committee.

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Court Sides With Bishop  
In Church Altar Dispute

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Baptist Press  
5/31/84

WASHINGTON (BP)—Unhappy members of a Roman Catholic parish in Missouri lost their final legal appeal when the U.S. Supreme Court refused to review a lower court decision upholding the parishioners' bishop in a dispute over altars in the sanctuary.

The high court action, noted in a routine one-line denial, has the effect of leaving intact a 1983 decision by a Missouri court that civil tribunals have no jurisdiction in such internal disputes in hierarchical-type churches.

Disgruntled members of Holy Family Parish in Freeburg, Mo., took their bishop, Michael F. McAuliffe, to court after he upheld a decision by the parish priest to remove portions of two side altars to comply with liturgical requirements set forth after the Second Vatican Council.

The legal action followed several fruitless efforts by the congregation's parish council to reverse the priest, Hugh Behan, who first proposed removing the side altars altogether.

But Joseph Struempfler, whose father donated the 18-foot-high altars to the church, led a group of more than 200 members to petition McAuliffe, bishop of Jefferson City, who nevertheless sided with his priest.

Several parishioners subsequently obtained a restraining order from Osage County court forbidding removal of the altars. They later agreed to a compromise with Behan allowing removal of the reredos, or top portions, of the altars provided they were stored safely in the church.

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After the apparent resolution, Behan and McAuliffe challenged the county court's involvement in the case in an appeal to the Missouri Court of Appeals. That panel agreed with them, ruling the lower court should not have exercised jurisdiction in an internal church dispute.

Appealing to the nation's high court after the Missouri Supreme Court refused to review the state appeals panel, Struempf and other parishioners argued that because the bishop acted "arbitrarily," they should have access to civil courts to challenge him. The state court ruling had the effect of barring them from relief in the courts "regardless of what a church official does with parish property," they declared.

Attorneys for the bishop argued that the First Amendment prohibits civil courts from "interfering" with church affairs such as liturgical practices. (83-1645, Struempf v. McAuliffe)

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California Baptist College  
Names New President

Baptist Press  
5/31/84

RIVERSIDE, Calif. (BP)—Russell R. Tuck Jr., associate superintendent of schools in St. Louis, has been elected the fourth president of California Baptist College in Riverside.

Tuck, 49, will succeed James R. Staples who was named chancellor of the liberal arts college in February. Staples plans to retire in January.

College trustees elected Tuck in a special session May 24. Associate superintendent of Parkway School District in St. Louis County, Tuck will officially assume the new post July 1.

Tuck is a graduate of Union University, Jackson, Tenn., and earned a master's degree from George Peabody College for Teachers, Nashville, Tenn., now a part of Vanderbilt University.

An active layman of Kirkwood (Mo.) Baptist Church for 23 years, Tuck and his wife, Marjori, have a son at Duke University, Russell III, and a daughter, Katherine, in high school.

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