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BJCPA - N

Politicians Warned Against
Claiming Divine Approval

By Larry Chesser

NEW YORK (BP)--Carefully avoiding partisan charges, leaders of major U.S. religious groups warned Republicans and Democrats against attributing divine approval to particular politics.

Alarmed by what they described as a divisive injection of religion into the 1984 political campaign, the Protestant, Jewish and Catholic leaders issued a statement calling on both political parties "to reject categorically the pernicious notion that only one brand of religion meets with God's approval and that others are necessarily evil."

The statement further asked leaders of political parties to commit themselves "to the spirit of religious tolerance and religious forbearance that is indispensable in a free society" and to "oppose any and all efforts, whether direct or subtle, to tamper with the First Amendment."

It was signed by James M. Dunn, executive director, Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs; Howard I. Friedman, president, American Jewish Committee; Claire Randall, general secretary, National Council of Churches; Margaret Ellen Traxler, founder and past president, National Coalition of American Nuns, and Mordecai Waxman, president, Synagogue Council of America.

Citing "serious erosion" of governmental commitment to the principle of church-state separation, the five religious leaders declared: "For government to intrude itself into religious practices, or to seek to impose certain religious beliefs or values on citizens who do not share them, is a clear and present danger to Americans of all faiths."

The constitutionally mandated separation of church and state, the statement said, "has enabled religion to flourish here with a vitality and absence of divisiveness that are the envy of religious men and women the world over."

While acknowledging that President Reagan's remarks on religion and politics at a Dallas prayer breakfast last month, as well as his charge that opponents of his school prayer proposal were "intolerant of religion," triggered their statement, the religious leaders insisted it was directed at politicians of both parties who would break down the wall of separation between church and state.

Asked if Reagan is blurring the distinction between church and state, Waxman said, "I think he is, but he is not alone."

Dunn told reporters there is a difference between mixing politics and religion—which he called "necessary within certain limits"—and merging church and state, which he called "never acceptable." But in the current political campaign, he said, there has been a deliberate attempt to "collapse the distinction."

"The problem with the Religious Right extremists who are now receiving so much attention is not that they are wrongly active but that they are actively wrong," Dunn said. "The most disturbing factor in this religio-political package is not their inflammatory rhetoric but their actual policy proposals."

Dunn commented on several proposals he called "hard evidence of willful contempt for the First Amendment."

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On attempts to pass a constitutional amendment to permit government-prescribed prayer in public schools, he charged, "State-approved religious exercises pervert authentic religion."

He called the push for tuition tax credits for parents of private and parochial school children a "regressive, elitist educational policy" which would be "dangerous to the public schools" and would "assure government intrusion into private and parochial schools."

Efforts to deny the Supreme Court and federal courts jurisdiction on such issues as school prayer and abortion, he said, are "unthinkable."

With only two more states needed to call for a constitutional convention for the first time in two centuries, Dunn warned that such a convention "might wreak havoc with the Bill of Rights if it exceeded its call."

Finally, he criticized the appointment of a U.S. ambassador to the Vatican, recalling a State Department official's admission that the move "would allow the United States to influence the political positions of the Roman Catholic Church."

"I knew that's what they believed," Dunn said, "but I didn't think they would say it."

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HMB - N

Metro Baptist Church
Hosts Carter, Work Team

By Jim Newton

Baptist Press
9/6/84

NEW YORK (BP)--Urging them to "strike a blow for the poor in the name of Christ," Metro Baptist Church Pastor Gene Bolin presented hammers to former President and Mrs. Jimmy Carter and 37 other volunteers rebuilding a six-floor apartment in Manhattan's lower east side.

For five nights, the former president and other volunteers stayed in the dormitory-type rooms at Metro Baptist, which moved last May to its present building just across from the Port Authority bus terminal in downtown Manhattan.

Each day, the former president and other volunteers worked as carpenters refurbishing the gutted brick shell located in the drug-infested, poverty-stricken lower east side.

It was Carter who recruited most of the volunteers working through Habitat for Humanity, an interdenominational Christian organization concerned about low-cost housing for the poor with international headquarters in Americus, Ga., just 15 miles from Carter's home in Plains.

When the building in Manhattan is completed at a cost of about \$700,000 sometime next year, 19 families will be able to buy one of the apartments for \$30,000 to \$35,000, an unbelievably low price for housing in Manhattan.

"We operate on the economics of Jesus: no profit, no interest, and 20 years to pay," said Millard Fuller, executive director and founder of Habitat for Humanity.

During a Wednesday night prayer service featuring a Bible study led by Carter, Bolin said Habitat and Metro Baptist are suitable partners because both operate on the economics of Jesus.

The 120-member church recently bought the five-story church building, which includes two floors of dormitory space, for \$1.7 million from Daytop drug rehabilitation center.

With a payment of \$20,000 on interest for the loan due the day Carter and the volunteers arrived, Bolin said the church was \$3,200 short of the amount needed. Two days later, a check for \$3,250 arrived from First Baptist Church, Decatur, Ga.

Bolin said Metro gave \$5,000 to Habitat for Humanity last year, the very first contribution made to start the project, and that the value of the free lodging provided to the Habitat work team was the equivalent of a \$35,000 contribution to Habitat.

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The church is committed to using its facilities to minister to the needs of the poor in the city, and to help relieve human suffering in the name of Christ. Several previous Habitat work teams have stayed at the church, and others are expected in the future, Bolin said.

Rob DeRocker, executive director of Habitat's New York project, is an active member of Metro Baptist Church, and was baptized as a new convert at Metro four years ago.

During the Wednesday night Bible study at Metro, Carter read from the Sermon on the Mount and confessed that during the week of high media exposure on the Habitat project, he had personally struggled with the words of Jesus who said:

"So when you give something to a needy person, do not make a big show of it, as the hypocrites do in the houses of worship and on the streets...but when you help a needy person, do it in such a way that even your closest friend will not know about it." (Matt 6:2-3, TEV.)

Carter said he did not feel there was anything wrong with being interviewed on the NBC Today Show or the ABC Good Morning America show, because he was able to communicate to so many people the needs and opportunities to be involved in providing housing for the poor.

"It's difficult, and almost impossible, for Rosalynn and me to minister in a secret way," he said.

Carter said all ministry should be done in order to serve Christ and others, not to serve selfish interests. Christians should avoid self-congratulations and having a superior attitude, and to constantly seek to tear down any barriers built with an attitude of superiority.

"I think what we have done this week is part of serving Christ's kingdom," Carter said. "It's been one of the most notable steps in my Christian life."

Fuller, responding to Carter's remarks, pointed out the Scripture also encourages Christians to "let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father in heaven."

Fuller expressed gratitude to Carter for his involvement, saying that as a result, the world knows what is going on in New York. He urged Christians to get involved in providing housing for the poor, and said part of the Lord's Prayer read by Carter asks that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

"And in heaven, there aren't going to be any shacks, or any bombed-out, burned-out buildings, because Jesus, the master craftsman, has gone there to prepare a place for us," Fuller said. He also expressed deep appreciation to every member of the Metro Baptist congregation. "You've allowed us to take over your church and have welcomed us like family."

Bolin, who introduced the former president as "Brother Jimmy Carter," said the church wanted to present something not only to the president, but to all the volunteers, to help them remember the experience, and to help them recruit others in future such projects.

He held up a shiny new hammer, and urged each to go out and use it repeatedly to strike a blow for the poor in the name of Christ.

Bolin also presented wall plaques on which the hammers could rest, with brass plates reading "Presented to ...in appreciation for volunteer work providing housing for the poor, presented by Habitat for Humanity, Americus, Ga., and Metro Baptist Church, New York City."

Bolin pointed out the wood on which the plaques were mounted was dirty and dusty, and was refuse lumber discarded in the rebuilding process at the project site. He warned the volunteers every time they handled it, their hands would get dirty as a reminder for the need to get involved in ministry to the poor.

"This has been a great week," Bolin concluded: "one we will not soon forget, and one this city and the world will not soon forget."

Cannot Exclude Any Part
Of SBC Program, Parks Says

FMB-N

RIDGECREST, N.C. (BP)--If Southern Baptists ever begin to pick and choose among what they have mutually agreed to support, they will destroy the very fabric that has made the denomination unique, R. Keith Parks is convinced.

The Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board president addressed the opening session of a first-of-its-kind Furloughing Missionary Cooperative Program Conference at Ridgecrest (N.C.) Baptist Conference Center, which brought together 270 furloughing foreign missionaries, 50 state convention leaders and 100 Foreign Mission Board staff members Sept. 4-6.

Parks made no direct mention of moves by some Southern Baptist Convention churches to give directly to their favorite causes, such as missions, or to avoid supporting seminaries or agencies with whom they disagree. But he underscored the strengths of Southern Baptists' cooperative denominational approach to missions, as opposed to a missions society approach, and said missions cannot be separated from the total program of Southern Baptists.

He drew applause as he stated: "Although you as missionaries and those of us as staff are committed to missions and see missions as the cohesive, unifying force of Southern Baptists, let it be on record that we are also committed to the total convention effort and, given the kind of missions involvement we have, once we begin to exclude any part of those agreed-upon causes, we will ultimately erode what we have become as a denomination."

The Foreign Mission Board, Stewardship Commission and state Baptist leaders, who worked for three years to plan the Ridgecrest conference, hope its participants will become better communicators of the significance of the Cooperative Program. This program, started in 1925, is the Southern Baptist plan through which individual churches voluntarily contribute a part of their receipts to help support programs both at home and abroad.

Parks noted that missions, considered a unifying force today in Southern Baptist life, has been a source of controversy and division for Baptists throughout much of their history.

A strong Calvinism which held that God already had predestined those who would be saved, a frontier distrust of educated missionaries, and a fear of a controlling mission society generated strong anti-missionary feelings in the 1800s, Parks explained.

When the SBC was formed in 1845, it avoided a society approach to missions, to which anyone could relate by making a contribution, and developed a broader organization. Parks noted the convention was not a society formed for a single purpose such as missions, but a denomination through which churches can express their total concerns.

He said many Southern Baptists today really do not understand what makes their denomination different from other Baptist groups, many of which don't stress cooperative support of denominational programs or a convention approach to missions.

Differences among Southern Baptists have been accentuated by the increased mobility of Americans, Parks explained. Many Baptists move from one kind of Baptist church to an entirely different kind without even knowing it, he said. And some Southern Baptist churches have been strongly influenced by persons coming in from Baptist churches which don't share Southern Baptist distinctives.

All Baptists believe in the Bible and are committed to it as the basis for their beliefs, and, "that must never be compromised or eroded or violated or weakened," he emphasized. He is convinced this belief has been and will continue to be the hallmark of Southern Baptists.

He noted, however, that Baptists' belief in the priesthood of the believer, which affirms an individual believer's right to read the Bible and interpret it for himself with the help of the Holy Spirit, "automatically says no two of us believe it exactly alike, and that's part of our strength."

He warned against anyone who would try to force conformity of "who we are as Baptists," which he said violates the very expression of being a Baptist, and against those who would revert to the old approach of doing missions through a society rather than through the denominational approach.

"I become a little impatient with those among us who recommend a reverting to ways that others have tried when history has recorded that the vibrancy and the vitality and the strength and the world impact of those who have gone down those trails has diminished through the years while God has blessed what we are trying to do and has strengthened and enlarged it year after year," he said.

Parks said he is convinced "one of the reasons God has seen fit to bless what we are doing is because out of the struggle and the trial and error and the strong commitment to biblical truth, our spiritual ancestors came upon a way that I believe is as close to the heart of biblical teaching as anyone has yet found.

"If there's a better way, biblically, I want to find it," he continued. "But I come back to say, let's improve what we have, let's strengthen it, let's make it more biblically oriented, let's understand it and teach it more clearly, and, if we ever change it, let's do so consciously, deliberately, not because of neglect, or ignorance, or confusion, or apathy, and let's certainly don't do it by misunderstanding where we have come from."

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