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October 22, 1985

85-130

South African Baptists Urge  
End Of 'Evil' Apartheid

By Robert O'Brien

GEORGE, South Africa (BP)--As a dove swooped symbolically overhead, the Baptist Union of Southern Africa took historic action at its annual assembly to urge South African President P. W. Botha to lead in abolishing "evil" apartheid "as a matter of extreme urgency."

The secret ballot total, released Oct. 21, showed 156 for, 51 against and 13 abstentions out of 250 delegates who met as their nation underwent racial turmoil. About 600 people attended the assembly, including Southern Baptist missionaries who work under the Baptist Union.

The assembly also affirmed an Aug. 24 letter from union officers to Botha on the same subject. Botha granted their request for union representatives to meet with him to discuss the crisis at a future date. Informing Botha of its action, the assembly said it would pray for God's guidance for him and other leaders and emphasized it doesn't have the expertise to dictate the exact route the government should take.

But, in language much more blunt than the officers' letter, the assembly labeled apartheid, "an evil which needs to be repented of." It called it a non-Christian, unbiblical stance for a nation which "claims to be committed to...Christian principles as found in Scripture."

The assembly called for termination of the government-proclaimed "state of emergency" which has surrounded ethnic townships with heavily armed police and military. It said the state of emergency has failed to halt the unrest "because basic causes of the unrest remain undealt with and therefore basic problems remain unsolved." The assembly also said the emergency "hinder(s)...the possibility of finding solutions" in many areas.

Many regard armed personnel as "a source of provocation for the very violence they are intended to prevent," the assembly said, and some are "totally undisciplined" and have performed "acts of brutality" which have stirred "the fires of race hatred...afresh."

A 12-point list to achieve "true Christian justice" called for: (1) full participation of all in the policy-making process in a single system of parliamentary government; (2) one national education system with equal standards and facilities for all; (3) and (4) abolition of racially based "influx control" and passbook laws which hamper freedom of movement; (5) equal pay for equal work; (6) assurance police and military "conform to the highest standards and that those who transgress be brought speedily to justice"; (7) termination of the state of emergency;

Also (8) removal of the Group Areas Act; (9) abolition of detention without trial; (10) amendment of population registration laws to eliminate all reference to race and color; (11) unconditional release of political prisoners and freedom to return for political exiles against whom no other criminal charge is made, and (12) elimination of banning persons to internal exile without criminal charges brought in court.

The statement also urged Botha to assemble not only currently recognized leaders for discussion on abolition of apartheid but also others "recognized as authentic leaders by a significant number of people...." It also pointed out the need to rectify many other problems, noting: "...If all the peoples of South Africa are involved in the decision-making process these things will in due course be attended to."

The statement had a startling impact on many union delegates. "This wasn't the Baptist union but a brand new union with a totally new approach to our country's problems," enthusiastically declared a coloured Baptist pastor. "Now we can go back to our young people with something in hand to show them," another coloured pastor said. Coloureds (people of mixed races) are one of the four South African racial groups which make up the union.

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SOUTHERN BAPTIST HISTORICAL  
LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES  
Historical Commission, SBC  
Nashville, Tennessee

The Baptist Union, made up of white, black, coloured and Indian churches, has a long history of urging the government to reform injustices in the apartheid system of racial segregation, but it's never urged dismantling the entire system. Until this year, that step seemed remote.

"The assembly appeared racist to me before because it thought it could reform apartheid," a coloured pastor said. "You cannot reform sin. You must abolish it."

Long-time observers say previous assemblies "danced around the issue and watered down statements" for fear of offending its diverse membership, creating problems with the government in South Africa's tense political situation, and violating Baptist principles of church-state separation. A purist stand on church and state seems to have been the strongest deterrent, as many Baptists have insisted the path of loyalty to government, non-confrontation and spiritual renewal is the correct Biblical approach to dealing with society's problems.

Baptist women led a number of churches in South Africa to conduct prayer sessions throughout the day delegates met to debate apartheid. As the debate began at 8:30 a.m., a dove flew in through a window, circled during the debate and flew out again about lunchtime when it ended.

Delegates left the hall awed at how the dove's symbolism reflected the spirit of the meeting and euphoric over their action. It produced sharp debate and strong differences but little or no discord among the multi-racial participants who have had a hard time understanding each other.

Assembly debate and the final vote reflected mixed emotions of people with a strong stance on church-state separation, desire for racial justice, emphasis on spiritual renewal and a sense of urgency that South Africa's crisis demands drastic restructuring of the society.

They listened not only to pleas of Baptists to refuse to violate the purist position on church and state but also to appeals such as one issued by a black Baptist pastor. He said apartheid has caused tremendous suffering among his people and that 30 percent of the families in his church are split up because of the controversial passbook law and Group Areas Act, which make it difficult for families to live in the same town.

"What God has put together--the family--let no man put asunder," he declared. "Apartheid laws put asunder things necessary for family life."

One observer estimated at least 30 of the 51 negative votes were by delegates who oppose apartheid but don't think Baptists should speak so bluntly to the government--including a white pastor who baptized seven non-whites into his multiracial church the week before the assembly.

Even with the anti-apartheid vote, most Baptists would continue to avoid violence or public demonstrations to protest apartheid. Even black Baptist pastors in the riot-torn black townships have refused black activist demands to use their churches as political rallying points, despite threats against their lives, families, homes and church buildings.

A constant theme during the assembly urged "revival, not revolution" and emphasized the real answer to peace is repentance of sin by South Africans and forgiveness by Jesus Christ.

Whatever South Africa does about apartheid, the assembly's action set a new tone for cooperation between racial groups in the Baptist Union. What observers projected as an explosive meeting turned into one of reconciliation and repentance. Repeatedly, delegates of all races stood to confess the national sin of apartheid or their own sin of racial prejudice and ask for corporate and individual forgiveness.

"We actually went through an experience of identifying with each other's hurts," said one observer. "All seemed eager to understand the other--and most of all to listen. This is the first assembly I've attended that we've had a tremendous listening experience from all sides."

Most black South African Baptists belong to their own convention by their own choice, rather than to the Baptist Union. They've been slow to respond to union offers to join the union. Whether the assembly's action will speed their response remains uncertain.

But South African Baptists of all colors hope their experience will repeat itself in the nation as a whole where peaceful coexistence of the races seems so far away.

Justices Accept Second  
Pornography Dispute

By Stan Haste

WASHINGTON (BP)—The U.S. Supreme Court announced Oct. 21 it will hear a second case this term testing local communities' legal ability to limit the sale and distribution of pornographic materials.

Already set for argument next month is review of a Seattle suburb's zoning ordinance forbidding adult movie theaters within 1,000 feet of residences, churches, parks or schools. A federal appeals court ruled the ordinance violated the First Amendment and held Renton, Wash., failed to establish "substantial governmental interest" in restricting freedom of speech.

The new case pits local officials in Erie County, N.Y., against a chain of stores selling pornographic video cassettes. Nearly two years ago, the local sheriff obtained a warrant for seizure of several video films depicting a variety of sexual activities, including intercourse and oral sex. Local officials then used the films to charge the stores' owners on several misdemeanor counts of violating New York state's obscenity law.

But before the case could come to trial, the store owners successfully sought suppression of the evidence, convincing a state court judge the sheriff's office did not have probable cause to seize the films. Two other state courts—including New York's highest appeals panel—agreed. The county then appealed to the nation's high court, which is expected to decide the case sometime next spring.

Current constitutional doctrine on pornography and obscenity dates to a 1957 case, Roth v. U.S., in which the court set down the foundational principle that obscenity is not protected by the First Amendment.

Another landmark decision, Miller v. California, rendered in 1973, held that local communities may set their own standards to define what is obscene material. Nationwide standards, the court ruled then, are inappropriate because views on the subject vary so widely from place to place.

At the same time, the court set forth a three-pronged test as basic guidelines for determining if a work that depicts or describes sexual conduct is obscene. Under the test, courts must determine (1) whether the average person, applying contemporary community standards, would find that the work, taken as a whole, appeals to the prurient interest; (2) whether the work depicts or describes, in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct specifically defined by the applicable state law, and (3) whether the work, taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value.

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Louisiana Association Majority  
Says Ordination For Men Only

By Marv Knox

Baptist Press  
10/22/85

BATON ROUGE, La. (BP)—Scripture teaches ordination to the ministry is for men only, a majority of messengers to Judson Baptist Association's annual meeting decided.

Women's ordination has been an issue within the association, which encompasses greater Baton Rouge, La., since last spring. Some messengers to the association's April semi-annual meeting protested the ordination to the gospel ministry of Isabel Austin, associational director of Christian social ministries, by Broadmoor Baptist Church.

Messengers in April created an ad hoc committee to study the issue and report to the annual meeting Oct. 15.

The ad hoc committee's report contained two primary provisions.

First, messengers to the Oct. 15 meeting were allowed to designate "the present consensus of the association on the question of the ordination of women to the ministry" by ballot vote. Second, future "employee problems" were referred to the association's administrative committee.

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The ballot vote, which capped almost two hours of discussion, directed messengers to choose from three positions:

--"I believe the Scripture teaches the ordination to the ministry of men only" (179 votes).

--"I believe the Scripture teaches the ordination to the ministry of both men and women" (88 votes).

--And 23 messengers responded, "I am unsure about what the Scripture teaches about this question."

Prefacing the committee's report and discussion on the matter, Jim Colvin, ad hoc committee chairman and layman from University Baptist Church, said, "Our report, our work, our study is not directive to your church." He stressed "Southern Baptists historically have taken a strong stand on the doctrine of the priesthood of the believer," even as that principle applies to local churches and their individual autonomy.

"At every point in their deliberations, the members of this committee have agonized over the damage to the work of Christ that would result from a breach in fellowship of our churches," Colvin added, noting committee members had tried to lay aside personal feelings in an effort to reach a practical solution without alienating churches or messengers.

Two conclusions predominated the study of the issue, he said.

First, individual Christians have the right to follow God's leadership, but associational employees have the obligation "to show responsible concern for the beliefs, the values, the feelings, the influence and the effectiveness" of the association and its churches.

Second, associational employees "have a right to expect Christian courtesy, a redemptive spirit, a clear definition" of their work relationships, adequate supervision and due process.

As a consequence, the ad hoc committee established "a formal and logical process of dealing with (controversial employee-related) questions which come to us from time to time," he said.

That process was delegated to the association's administrative committee (which bylaws state is the association's personnel committee), along with its executive director of missions and moderator. This group was "designated with the responsibility of dealing with all of the association's employee problems requiring a formal hearing, and with all controversial issues and/or relationships in which associational employees are involved."

It was given the responsibility of advising employees and prospective employees of the association's expectations and standards. It also was given authority to initiate contact with "any employee whose conduct, relationships or involvements seem, in the judgment of the administrative committee, to deserve scrutiny" and to "take appropriate and effective action in dealing promptly with any employee refusing to comply" with its actions.

Provisions allowed for the administrative committee to appeal to the guidance of the association's executive board, and employees were give the same channel of appeal.

Responding to a question by John Goodwin, pastor of Broadmoor Baptist Church, Colvin noted the result of the straw vote will "inform the thinking" of the administrative committee. However, he added the vote "does not bind anyone." Responding to another question by Goodwin, Colvin noted the action will not be retroactive to include actions taken by associational employees in the past.

Messengers gave Moderator Duke a standing ovation for the way he led the "warm-spirited discussion."

Ed Gregory Reelected To Head  
Iowa Southern Baptist Fellowship

DES MOINES, Iowa (BP)—Ed Gregory, pastor of Immanuel Baptist Church in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, was reelected president of the Iowa Southern Baptist Fellowship at its annual meeting Oct. 18-19 in Des Moines.

Terry Davis, pastor of Immanuel Baptist Church in Waterloo, was elected vice-president and Dorothy McNeal, a layperson from Fort Dodge, was reelected secretary.

A budget of \$886,725 was approved for 1986 with 13 percent (\$26,000) to go to the national Cooperative Program, the unified budget of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Iowa's relationship with the Missouri Baptist Convention was highlighted by the presence and message of John Gilbert, president of the Missouri convention.

A major item of business was the appointment of a long range planning committee which will be chaired by Gregory, to work with a team from the Home Mission Board and a team from the Baptist Sunday School Board, to do long range planning for the fellowship in relationship to the Bold Mission Thrust goals of the SBC.

Bold Mission Thrust is a Southern Baptist effort to present the message of Jesus Christ to every person in the world by the year 2000.

The 1986 convention will meet in Davenport, Iowa, Oct. 17-18.