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March 28, 1985

85-36

Divided High Court Affirms
Christmas Nativity Displays

By Stan Hastey

WASHINGTON (BP)—An equally divided U.S. Supreme Court ruled March 27 that cities and towns must provide space on public property for Christmas nativity scenes or creches, sponsored by private groups.

In a one-sentence, unsigned opinion, the high court sided with a group of citizens in the heavily Jewish village of Scarsdale, N.Y., who challenged the decision of local officials to deny permission for the creche. Town leaders followed the recommendation of a separate citizens' study panel when they denied the permission.

The unusual 4-4 deadlock came about because of the illness of Justice Lewis F. Powell Jr., who was hospitalized in February when oral arguments in the case were heard. Powell declined to participate in the decision, although Supreme Court rules gave him the option of doing so.

In its brief notice affirming a federal court of appeals decision siding with the Scarsdale citizen's group the court gave no breakdown in the tie vote.

Earlier, a lower federal court had agreed with town officials that permitting the nativity display on public property violated the Constitution's ban on an establishment of religion.

But the appeals court reversed, citing a Supreme Court decision last year in another creche case from Pawtucket, R.I.

In that well-publicized dispute, the court ruled local municipalities may erect creches when they constitute but one part of a larger Christmas display that includes secular figures of the season. The court also underscored the fact that in the Pawtucket dispute the display was set up in a private—rather than a public—park.

Because the high court decided last year's Pawtucket case on such narrow legal grounds by a 5-4 vote, some court observers had expected a majority of justices in the Scarsdale dispute to go along with the village's refusal to allow the creche.

By agreeing instead with the citizens group, the court apparently has decided that Christmas nativity scenes are permissible in most—if not all—situations.

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Valentine: 'Discernment'
Needed On Abortion Issue

**SOUTHERN BAPTIST HISTORICAL
LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES
Historical Commission, SBC
Nashville, Tennessee**
By David Wilkinson

Baptist Press
3/28/85

FORT WORTH, Texas (BP)—Noting "nothing is to be gained by dividing up into camps and calling each other names," Christian Life Commission Executive Director Foy Valentin called upon Southern Baptists "to act with discernment, judgment, compassion, wisdom and courage" in dealing with the volatile issue of abortion.

In an address at the Southern Baptist Convention agency's national seminar, Valentin surveyed the biblical, historical, theological and ethical dimensions of the abortion question and proposed some guiding principles for churches to follow in responding to the issue.

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Although the pro-life movement in the United States "has generally been for an absolute prohibition of all abortions," Valentine observed "there is no absolute consensus in the church or out of it" on the issue.

He reviewed the long history of debate about abortion, highlighting dominant themes within Roman Catholic and Protestant thought. Citing the recent work of Roman Catholic theologian and ethicist Daniel Maguire, he said a diversity of opinion on the issue has existed even within Roman Catholicism.

The complexities of the abortion issue have been complicated further in recent years by overlapping political, social and religious agendas, Valentine added.

Christians, he said, have generally held to "a conservative view of abortion, rejecting any frivolous approach to the issue and sharing the belief that God is the creator of life, the giver of human sexuality and the protector of marriage and the family."

While a moral consensus "need not permanently evade our grasp," a democratic society "cannot be held to the same moral standards that Christians are constrained to follow," he pointed out. "We are not really ready to stone adulterers to death; but then neither was Israel who let David and Bathsheba go scot free in spite of the Mosaic requirement of capital punishment for their philandering."

In a treatment of biblical material related to abortion, Valentine said the scriptures offer "principles with which to deal with the issue but no prooftexts with which to smite opponents in the ongoing battle."

Despite frequent claims to the contrary, "from Genesis to Revelation there is not a single reference to induced abortion in the sense that the word is used today," he said. Only an account dealing with miscarriage in Exodus 21:22, he explained, explicitly addresses fetal life.

He emphasized, however, the Bible does "inform our understanding of the abortion issue" as it does all other moral issues.

Valentine also urged the church to focus on education and ministry which helps to prevent unwanted pregnancies.

If society is to limit unwanted abortions, he said, then it also "must support the prevention of unwanted pregnancies, and the church must work far more responsibly in this arena in the future than we have done in the past."

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Convocation Highlights Common
Ministry Of Clergy, Laity

By Stan Hastey

Baptist Press
3/28/85

WAKE FOREST, N.C. (BP)--A law professor, a senior seminary teacher, a former president of Woman's Missionary Union and a seminary president reminded more than 250 laypersons, pastors and students that the Bible makes no distinction between the ministry of laity and clergy and challenged Southern Baptist laypersons to take their rightful place in church and denominational affairs.

In a keynote address to the 1985 Convocation of the Laity on the campus of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C., keynote speaker Robert E. Shepherd Jr. declared, "We often forget that Christianity is a religion founded, spread and nourished by the laity." The University of Richmond law professor added: "Jesus himself was not a member of the priestly class nor were any of the fishermen, tax collectors or others called by him to be his disciples."

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Shepherd also said the current conflict between so-called "conservatives" and "moderates" within the Southern Baptist Convention "speaks eloquently to the absence of an active laity as a positive force within our denomination. We have largely abdicated our role to the 'super ministers' who deal in body counts rather than in the depths of commitment and who have forgotten our past as a people and the role of the laity in forging that past."

He suggested the SBC follow the Baptist General Association of Virginia practice of alternating that state body's presidency between clergy and laity as a way out of current domination of the SBC presidency by pastors of large churches.

"There is no super Olympic Committee deciding who is an amateur and who is a professional where the work of the Lord is concerned," Shepherd declared.

Shepherd, who authored Virginia's first child abuse law in 1965, told of a personal spiritual pilgrimage involving deeper Bible study. "I realize from my study of this great book that the one I had chosen to follow placed some very high demands on me," he said, and "(that) commitment to Jesus of Nazareth as Lord and Saviour was a commitment to a lifestyle that involved seeing and affirming the personhood of others."

Such a commitment, he noted, "led me to a deeper involvement in the legal rights of children.... It was as if children were my congregation and the courtroom or the legislative chamber was my pulpit."

Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Senior Professor Findley B. Edge underscored Shepherd's point in a series of Bible studies on the role of the laity. "The call to salvation and the call to ministry is one and the same," he declared, adding, "If we are 'in Christ' he has given us the ministry of reconciliation."

Like the Richmond lawyer, Edge repeatedly underscored the false distinction in Southern Baptist life between clergy and laity, noting a more biblically based view of ministry highlighting the proper place of layperson would actually help pastors.

"We really expect the pastor to do an impossible task," he declared, adding the typical pastor spends most of his time doing administrative chores, a task he does not enjoy or do well.

"The one overriding task of the pastor is to teach others," the veteran Baptist church renewal expert said. Laypeople, along with pastors, he added, are those called to do the ministry of the church.

Edge, author of the forthcoming book, *The Doctrine of the Laity*, for next year's Baptist Doctrine Study Week, concluded it is "tragic" that all the ministries described in the New Testament have been combined and one person in the congregation, the pastor, has been made responsible for all.

Former Woman's Missionary Union President Christine Gregory, of Danville, Va., addressed her commitments to personal evangelism and ethical righteousness.

"I believe in personal, one to one, evangelism," the former SBC first vice-president declared. Noting if every Christian in the world won only one other person to faith in Christ every year and taught that one to win another, the whole world could be Christian in 32 years, Gregory added: "I do not believe that I am going to win my one each by assuming that I am such an example that persons automatically ask who I am. My faith must be verbalized in telling whose I am."

Gregory also spoke of her Christian responsibility as a peacemaker. Recalling the pain of having three sons grow up during the Vietnam War era, she said: "The opposite of war is peace and men will know peace when they know the Prince of Peace and follow his teachings."

On the contrast between rich and poor, Gregory stated the view that "in the final analysis it is our lifestyles which best speak to our words.... To be the truly Christian minority in a world of 'have nots' is perhaps the most difficult of our efforts."

Her goal, she said, is "to become identified with the radical Jesus" in responding to the needs of the world.

Southeastern Seminary President W. Randall Lolley warned about what he called "fear of failure" as a problem common to all Christians, pastors and laypersons alike, but added: "In Christ, failure does not have to be final. It certainly does not have to be fatal."

In a sermon closing the convocation, Lolley said: "In our world, we're all going to hack our initials on the tree of failure." But, he added, "The purpose of God will always place you in a ministry in which God will energize you sufficiently to fulfill it."

The seminary head's text, taken from John 21 described the apostle Peter's repeated failures during the final hours of Jesus' earthly life before the crucifixion. Calling the day following the crucifixion Peter's "black Friday," after he had denied Jesus three times and then fled back to his fishing nets, Lolley declared: "This big fisherman...(was) capable of a great fall," but also "of a great recall."

Peter's forgiveness was complete, Lolley said, because "Jesus came trusting him again" by giving him a new ministry with the commands, "Feed my lambs," and "Feed my sheep."

Christians, Lolley declared, "are the only people on the planet who can afford to be wrong," and concluded: "In the final analysis, God's work in this world and his disciples' work become one and the same."

Leaders of two SBC agencies and three state convention departments organized the convocation. They included William Clemmons, professor of Christian education at Southeastern; Larry Yoder, director of church relations for the Brotherhood Commission; David Langford, director of the Brotherhood department of the North Carolina Baptist Convention; Ben J. Connell, director of the South Carolina Baptist Convention Brotherhood department, and Lloyd F. Jackson, director of the Baptists Men's department of the Baptist General Association of Virginia.

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Sherman Urges Churches
To Confront Culture

By David Wilkinson

Baptist Press
3/28/85

FORT WORTH, Texas (BP)—In a keynote address at the national seminar of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission, Texas pastor Cecil Sherman challenged Southern Baptists to do battle with culture in the name of Christ.

Sherman, pastor of Broadway Baptist Church in Fort Worth, told more than 270 participants in the opening session that only when "the gospel defeats culture in the contest for the soul of the church" will Christians be able effectively to apply the gospel to life's issues.

"Applying the Gospel in the Local Church" was the theme of the annual three-day seminar at the Fort Worth Hilton.

Sherman, who returned to his home state earlier this year after 21 years as pastor of First Baptist Church, Asheville, N.C., pointed out that the church too often adopts culture's standards.

"Success in our world," he illustrated, "is measured by growth and wealth. So where is the successful church? It is the one that is growing in size and wealth." The church that "buys into" that model, he said, "has just become one kind of American growth company."

In order to lead a "successful," growing church, he added, pastors often avoid controversial biblical themes and social issues. Rather than helping persons set biblically-determined priorities for their lives, "we help them toward their already in-place goals," he said. "The end result" is that churches become "enabling agencies that help Americans to be more successful at being American. Our culture has captured and now uses our churches."

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Such models, Sherman pointed out, do not describe all churches. Fortunately, he said, "the good news is that there is a conscience that wants to come to life and wrestle with and finally defeat our culture." An increasing number of the laity are "open" and "teachable" to the truths of the gospel, he said. But pastors who want to help guide them must be willing to make "a long-term commitment to the life of the church."

On the other side of the coin, Sherman noted many Christian social activists are guilty of ignoring or criticizing other important church emphases such as evangelism, stewardship and administration.

"Holding to half a gospel is not just the sin of the right wing," he warned. "In fact, all of us suffer from small gospels; some of us just suffer more than others."

He urged pastors as "interpreters" to "free the gospel to work in the church." Through narrow interpretations of Scripture, too many pastors "cut the gospel of Jesus right out of the Bible," he claimed. "If Jesus is the centerpiece of our faith, then the words of Jesus ought to be the highest authority in our faith."

By failing to stress both belief and action, Sherman said, these pastors have created "a hermeneutical problem of massive proportions."

"This is the San Andreas fault in Southern Baptist life," he said. "When there is movement along the fault, sometimes our houses tumble and crumble."

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