



BAPTIST PRESS

News Service of the Southern Baptist Convention

NATIONAL OFFICE

SBC Executive Committee
901 Commerce #750
Nashville, Tennessee 37203
(615) 244-2355
Wilmer C. Fields, Director
Dan Martin, News Editor
Craig Bird, Feature Editor

BUREAUS

ATLANTA Jim Newton, Chief, 1350 Spring St., N.W., Atlanta, Ga. 30367, Telephone (404) 873-4041
DALLAS Thomas J. Brannon, Chief, 103 Baptist Building, Dallas, Texas 75201, Telephone (214) 741-1996
NASHVILLE (Baptist Sunday School Board) Lloyd T. Householder, Chief, 127 Ninth Ave., N., Nashville, Tenn. 37234, Telephone (615) 251-2300
RICHMOND (Foreign) Robert L. Stanley, Chief, 3806 Monument Ave., Richmond, Va. 23230, Telephone (804) 353-0151
WASHINGTON Stan L. Hasty, Chief, 200 Maryland Ave., N.E., Washington, D.C. 20002, Telephone (202) 544-4226

April 3, 1985

85-39

Only An 'Act of God'
Can Help SBC: Moore

By Mike Duduit

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (BP)—Although he would like to see "some type of breakthrough" which will allow the Southern Baptist Convention to meet in Dallas this June "with some type of harmony," Winfred Moore believes only "an act of God" will make that possible.

Moore, pastor of First Baptist Church, Amarillo, Texas, and president of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, was interviewed about current denominational issues following an address at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary's Denominational Heritage Week.

During the interview, he expressed concern about the current denominational crisis in the SBC and hopes for re-uniting the convention.

The Texas pastor is concerned that Southern Baptists are being diverted from their primary calling of missions and evangelism.

"Frankly, I'm really sick that it has gotten to this place," Moore said. "We are spending more time with this controversy than with the Great Commission. It bothers me greatly but it didn't bother me soon enough."

Moore believes trust, not belief about the Bible, is at the heart of the current unrest within the denomination.

"What bothers me is that we have reached the place where there is no trust, and I honestly believe that the thing our people are out there wanting more than anything is to be able to trust the motives of the pastors and the other people who are leading this convention."

Moore, who has been pastor of the Amarillo church 25 years and currently is on the Baylor University board of trustees, believes accusations of liberalism have been misdirected against many Southern Baptist professors and other denominational leaders.

"To me, it's not an issue of the Bible," he explained. "I don't agree with everything the dearest friends I have believe, but it never occurred to me (that they) disbelieved the Bible or don't believe it is God's inspired word. It doesn't bother me that I don't agree with what somebody else thinks. I don't even agree with some of the things I thought 10 years ago."

Since his name has been mentioned as a possible nominee as convention president in Dallas, some have accused him of being a liberal as well—much to Moore's astonishment.

"I've been called just a little to the right of the Ayatollah. I'm so conservative I thought Barry Goldwater was a liberal. But all of a sudden I've become not just a moderate but a liberal."

Moore insists he has made no commitments about being nominated as an alternative to current convention president Charles Stanley (pastor of First Baptist Church of Atlanta) when the convention meets in Dallas.

"Nobody has asked me. I have made no decisions. I haven't really been called on yet," the Texas pastor said.

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The Amarillo pastor expressed hope the convention will find a way to reconciliation and trust.

"I love my denomination. I am greatly in debt to it. It grieves me, not that we disagree—we've always disagreed—but that we have reached the place in our disagreement that there is such bitterness."

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C-N

Patterson Addresses
South Carolinians

Baptist Press
4/3/85

LEXINGTON, S.C. (BP)—The president of Criswell Center for Biblical Studies in Dallas told a South Carolina audience Southern Baptists "will be deciding in the next few months the kind of denomination we're going to be."

Paige Patterson spoke to more than 100 persons at Oakwood Baptist Church in what was billed as a preview of the Southern Baptist Convention June 11-13 in Dallas Convention Center.

Patterson described the Southern Baptist Convention as a "growing bureaucracy" which has become "increasingly insensitive" to the beliefs of the majority of its members. He said most Southern Baptists believe in the inerrancy of the Bible, "but only two professors at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary believe that."

Responding to the tactics of what has been called the conservative-fundamentalist party of the SBC, Patterson said: "I don't like my methods either, but I'd rather do something and save the ship than do nothing and let it sink."

The meeting was coordinated by Mark Arrington, pastor of Friendship Baptist Church of Abbeville.

"I feel the meeting was healthy," Arrington said. "There were people there of both persuasions. I just wanted them to hear things from the other perspective and felt that Paige Patterson was the best man we could get for that."

Arrington said he believes Charles Stanley, pastor of First Baptist Church of Atlanta, will be reelected president of the SBC. "If he is not," said Arrington, "I think it will hurt the Southern Baptist Convention. It will set us back several years in the effort to turn some things around."

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CLC
(C)-N

Chafin: Dallas SBC
May Be 'Turnabout'

Baptist Press
4/3/85

FORT WORTH, Texas (BP)—Kenneth Chafin, declaring he knows "what it's like to be a veteran of an unpopular war," predicted June's Southern Baptist Convention in Dallas could mark a "turnabout" in the denomination's ongoing "inerrancy controversy."

Chafin, professor of preaching at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Ky., addressed issues related to the upcoming meeting in a speech at the national seminar of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission.

The former pastor of South Main Baptist Church in Houston lamented the recent decision of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary trustees to reject the administration's recommendation to fire a faculty member.

Amid charges of political implications on both sides and allegations that a "profane man was being returned to the classroom," the trustees voted 19-12 to fire Farrar Patterson, associate professor of communication and preaching. The vote was two voices short of the required two-thirds majority needed to sustain the administration's recommendation.

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"I think when a professor stands and calls the president of Southwestern Seminary a (unprintable name) and is made a hero by fundamentalist trustees, and the president is made a heel, and those who stand in fear of rocking the boat say nothing, we are indeed a sick denomination," declared Chafin.

Chafin said he has been stung through the years by criticism of his public opposition to the fundamentalist movement within the SBC.

"I know what it's like to be a veteran of an unpopular war," he said. "There have been times in years past when I walked in and out among the agency heads and felt like a Vietnam veteran."

"In our denomination," he added, "it's a greater sin to rock the boat than to steal the boat."

In a question-and-answer session following his message, Chafin recalled that during earlier days of the denominational controversy, he and some other pastors were dubbed "the Gatlinburg Gang" after meeting in response to the announced "takeover" strategy led by fundamentalist leaders Paul Pressler, a Houston appeals court judge, and Paige Patterson, president of Criswell Center for Biblical Studies.

"At the time," he said, "the people we were defending were as suspicious of us as those we were refuting."

Chafin said he now believes, however, the "true nature" of the controversy has become more clear and that the struggle ultimately will culminate in a "rebirth" of local church autonomy and a "return to the things that made us great."

In his address, Chafin also urged pastors to deal more in their preaching with personal and social morality.

"We have abandoned our people to a ruthless, sensate, sin-sick society," he said. Preachers, he declared, "must put love of justice and mercy above our personal ambition."

"Don't let fear of losing your job stop you," he said. "For every one who loses his job because of (addressing) ethical issues, 100 lose their jobs because they are boring or bored."

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Florida Pastor Says
Bombers Are 'Heroes'

By Jack Brymer

Baptist Press
4/3/85

PENSACOLA, Fla. (BP)—When David Shofner first heard the news of the bombing of abortion clinics in Pensacola on Christmas morning last year, he thought, "I hope they catch whoever did it."

Several days later when two young couples were arrested and charged with the crime, Shofner was even more shocked. As it turned out, the four were active members of a Pensacola church. "At first, I felt it was awful that a Christian would do such a thing," Shofner said in a telephone conversation to the Florida Baptist Witness, newsjournal of the Florida Baptist Convention.

But Shofner's feelings have changed and the anti-abortion organization he heads, Pensacola Pro-Life Coalition, has set up a defense fund for the accused quartet.

Although the accused bombers are members of a Pentacostal church, the mother of one of them is a member of West Pensacola Baptist Church, where Shofner has been pastor for 16 years.

At a press conference announcing the establishment of the defense fund, Shofner said, "These young people will go down in history as heroes—not criminals. They did something to stop abortions."

Shofner became involved in the anti-abortion movement last April following an appearance by Penny Lea, founder of I Believe in Life, a Minneapolis-based pro-life organization.

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Since then, Shofner or members of his church have picketed the abortion centers.

According to Shofner, most of the abortions are done on Saturday. There is a nurse at the clinic during the week and physicians are brought in to do the abortions. Most of the picketing is done on Saturdays.

Shofner said he changed his thinking about the bombings after talking with the young people and hearing their reasons for doing it. Pointing out that the four accused of the bombing have, in fact, confessed to the act, Shofner explained they did it to call attention to the abortion issue since other efforts had failed.

"When they bombed the first clinic and got by with it, they thought they could do it again," Shofner suggested. "I suppose in their youth, being naive, they thought that would stop it. They did it in the morning when no one would be hurt. If they had it to do over again, they probably would not do it," he explained.

Justified or otherwise, the bombings have earned considerable attention. According to Shofner, he has received telephone calls from all over the country offering support for the cause. Many of those who have called are women who have had abortions and expressed feelings of guilt and regret for doing so.

"I feel like the pro-life movement is a growing phenomenon," Shofner said. He also believes eventually the Supreme Court will rule against abortion on demand and people then will say, "Why didn't you do this sooner?"

Shofner said although some people in the church are not happy he is taking such a stand, he does have strong support. Most of the pickets come from his church although other churches and pastors have assisted from time to time.

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(Brymer is editor of the Florida Baptist Witness.)

Foreign Mission Board
Dominates BPRA Awards

C-N

Baptist Press
4/3/85

RICHMOND, Va. (BP)—All levels of Southern Baptist life—the local church, state convention organizations and national agencies—shared in the 1985 awards from the Baptist Public Relations Association.

The Foreign Mission Board, headquartered in Richmond, Va. (the host city for the 1985 annual meeting of the organization), collected the most citations, earning 11 of the 45 first place awards and 10 of the 41 second place honors.

But the widespread nature of BPRA was evident in the five "exceptional achievement" awards selected from all entries. One went to a staff member of an Alabama church, two went to Southern Baptist universities and two went to national SBC agencies.

Hoyt R. Wilson, minister of education/administration at Mountain Brook Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala., and a member of BPRA for only two years, won the M.E. Dodd Award for exceptional achievement in audio-visual productions, against big-budget competition from SBC agencies.

R. Mark Sandlin of the Home Mission Board won the Fon H. Scofield Award for exceptional achievement in publication photography and Stan Hastey of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs received the Frank Burkhalter Award for exceptional achievement in writing.

Karen Wigger Benson of Baylor University in Waco, Texas, won the Arthur S. Davenport Award for significant achievement in public relations and Charlotte M. Legg of William Jewell College in Liberty, Mo., got the Albert McClellan Award for exceptional achievement in print media publications.

Each of the major awards are named for a pioneer in Southern Baptist public relations.

Among agencies, the Home Mission Board in Atlanta collected four first places and six second places; Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., earned three firsts and four seconds; Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, took home four first place awards and one second;

The Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs in Washington won four first places; the Brotherhood Commission in Memphis, Tenn., had two first place and two second place finishes; the Christian Life Commission in Nashville, Tenn., won one first and three seconds;

The Baptist Sunday School Board in Nashville had two second place finishes while four SBC agencies took home solo first place certificates: the Annunity Board in Dallas, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, the Historical Commission in Nashville and Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary in Mill Valley, Calif.

Among state organizations, Baylor University collected six firsts and one second; the Baptist General Convention of Texas and the Baptist Children's Homes of North Carolina each won one first and two seconds; William Jewell College took a pair of firsts; the California Southern Baptist Convention had a first and a second;

Word and Way, the newsjournal of the Missouri Baptist Convention, won two second place awards; and the Baptist Hospital in Memphis and the Florida Baptist Convention each won a second place certificate.

Hastey; Joanna B. Pinneo and Ronald Lawson, of the Foreign Mission Board, and Ronald Beverly of Baylor University were the leading individual awards winners numerically.

Hastey won four first place awards: news story, editorial/opinion writing, interpretative/investigative reporting and news series (with Larry Chesser, also of BJCPA). Pinneo won four firsts (black and white single news photo, black and white single feature photo, color single feature photo and black and white general photo) and one second (feature photo story).

Lawson took first place honors in television commercial or public service spot, television or video production and motion picture film. Beverly also won three top awards in the areas of print media design (up to two colors), print media design (up to four colors) and catalog/book design (up to two colors).

Other individual winners were:

Public Relations Project: 1st—Benson, Baylor; 2nd—David Clanton, Baylor.
Development Project: 1st—John Earl Seelig, James Holcomb and Philip Poole, Southwestern seminary; 2nd—Ina L. Cameron, Florida Baptist Convention.

Motion Picture Film: 2nd—Ben L. Sherman, Home Mission Board. Filmstrip and/or Slid Presentation: 2nd—Elaine J. Lidholm, Foreign Mission Board. Multi-image Media Presentations: 1st—Lidholm; 2nd—Wilson, Mountain Brook Baptist Church, Birmingham, Ala.

Television Commercial or Public Service Spot: 2nd—Roy Jennings, Baptist Hospital, Memphis, Tenn. Audio Production: 1st—Mark A. Wyatt, California Southern Baptist Convention. Television or Video Production: 2nd—David E. Powers, minister of media, Broadway Baptist Church, Fort Worth, Texas.

Single News Photograph: (black and white single news photo) 2nd—Robert O'Brien, Foreign Mission Board; (color single news photo) 1st—David Bell, Southwestern seminary. News Photo Story: (black and white) 1st—David Bell, 2nd—Trennis Henderson and Gigi Schrader, Word and Way; (color) 1st—R. Mark Sandlin.

Single Feature Photo: (black and white) 2nd—Richard W. Shock, Southern seminary; (color) 2nd—Shock. Feature Photo Story: (black and white) 1st—Shock; (color) 1st—Sandlin, 2nd—Don Rutledge, Foreign Mission Board.

General Photography: (black and white) 2nd—Rutledge; (color) 1st—Shock, 2nd—Rutledge. Advertisement, single: 1st—Tim Seanor, Brotherhood Commission. Advertisement, series: 1st—Lynda Kokel, Orville Scott and Nan Dickson, Baptist General Convention of Texas.

Annual Report: 1st--Ray Furr, Annuity Board; 2nd--Rick Stegall, Baptist Children's Homes of North Carolina. Academic Catalogue: 1st--C. Mark Smith, Golden Gate seminary; 2nd--Seelig and Poole, Southwestern seminary.

Product Catalogue: 1st--Legg; 2nd--Stegall. Brochure: 1st--Seelig and Poole; 2nd--Jim Gilliland, Linda Lawson and Marshall Walker, Baptist Sunday School Board. Poster: 1st--Wayne M. Grinstead, Home Mission Board; 2nd--Martha S. Linton, Home Mission Board.

Folder: 1st--Legg; 2nd--Tim Field, Christian Life Commission. Newsletter: 1st--David R. Wilkinson, Christian Life Commission; 2nd--Bob Allen, Jim Somerville and Shock, Southern seminary. Employee or In-house Publication: 1st--Nancy Barcus and Alan Hunt, Baylor.

Magazine: 1st--Leland Webb, Foreign Mission Board; 2nd--(three-way tie) Mike Livingston, Brotherhood Commission, Connie R. Davis, Brotherhood Commission and Phyllis Thompson, Home Mission Board. News Publication: 1st--Mariana B. Boucher, Baptist Children's Homes of North Carolina; 2nd--Glenn Davis, Baptist General Convention of Texas.

Special Publications: 1st--Charles W. Dewese, Historical Commission; 2nd--Fields. Direct Mail Campaign: 1st--Michael Dudit and Somerville, Southern seminary; 2nd--Sherri Anthony and Martha Linton, Home Mission Board. Logo Design: 1st--Don Ellis, New Orleans seminary.

Advertising Design: (up to two colors) 1st--Roy David White, Brotherhood Commission; 2nd--Nancy Wogsland, Foreign Mission Board. General Print Media Design: (up to two colors) 2nd--Davis; (up to four colors) 2nd--Bill Latta, Baptist Sunday School Board.

Catalog/Book Design: 2nd--Somerville. Publication Design: (up to four colors) 1st--Dan Beatty and Wogsland, Foreign Mission Board; 2nd--Thompson. News story: 2nd--Mary Jane Welch, Foreign Mission Board. News Series: 2nd--Marty Croll, Foreign Mission Board.

Interpretative/Investigative Reporting: 2nd--Wyatt. Feature Story: 1st--Benson and Keith Randall, Baylor University; 2nd--Sherri Anthony, Home Mission Board. Feature Series: 1st--Martha Skelton, Foreign Mission Board; 2nd--Mike Creswell, Foreign Mission Board. Editorial/Opinion Writing: 2nd--Robert S. Terry, Word and Way.

Winners were selected from among 518 entries submitted.

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Women In Ministry
Becoming Top Issue

*Historical Comm.
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Baptist Press
4/3/85

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP)—The role of women in ministry is fast becoming a top issue in Southern Baptist life, according to the writer of an interpretative article in the first issue of Baptist Heritage Update.

Leon McBeth, professor of church history at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, Texas, writes, "What women may or may not do in church has moved up a few points on the Baptist 'Richter Scale' of public focus of controversy."

More pointedly, McBeth says, "Some people think that the question of women in ministry has now moved up to front burner as the most explosive issue among Southern Baptists, and that it may replace inerrancy as the public focus of the fundamentalist issue."

McBeth's article appears in the spring issue of the newsletter published by the Historical Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention.

McBeth, currently trustee and former trustee chairman of the Historical Commission, says women serving in deacon and preaching roles is not new. Women were deacons and preached in some of the earliest Baptist churches in England. By the 1700s, women also performed these functions in some Baptist churches in the South.

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"What is new," McBeth continues, "is for Baptist women to receive formal ordination to these roles."

McBeth urges a corrective to the assumption of many "that a woman who is ordained, or wants to be, holds liberal doctrine. That is an unfair stereotype. Many such women hold conservative views."

The article concludes with a description of two current trends:

First, "More women are involved in more forms of ministry. The fact is that Southern Baptist women do serve as pastors: they do preach, baptize, perform weddings and funerals, conduct pastoral counseling and fulfill other ministry roles. While Baptists debate the issue, the women simply go on ministering."

Second, "There is a trend toward more open acceptance of women in church leadership roles."

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Evelyn Blount To Head
South Carolina WMU

WMU
C-N

Baptist Press
4/3/85

COLUMBIA, S.C. (BP)—Evelyn Blount of Birmingham, Ala., has been elected executive director of Woman's Missionary Union, auxiliary to South Carolina Baptist Convention, effective July 1.

Blount is program design specialist in the missions education system of WMU, SBC.

She will succeed Hannah Hills, who is retiring at the end of June after 13 years as executive director.

Blount, a native of Winder, Ga., went to WMU in 1983 as youth department supervisor and became field services department director in 1974. She was assistant to the education division director in 1979 and was national enlargement plan director just prior to accepting her current position.

She is a graduate of The Woman's College of Georgia in Milledgeville and Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Ky., where she received the master of religious education degree. She has been a teacher, minister of education and was Acteens director for WMU in Georgia prior to joining the staff in Birmingham.

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Ariz Paper
C-N

Houston Layman, Arizona
Pastor Discuss Controversy

By Elizabeth Young

Baptist Press
4/3/85

PHOENIX, Ariz. (BP)—A Houston layman and an Arizona pastor discussed differing viewpoints about the controversy in the Southern Baptist Convention during a pastors' conference in late March.

Paul Pressler, a Houston appeals court judge, spoke to about 60 pastors and church leaders at Starlight Baptist Church in Phoenix at the invitation of the Estrella Baptist Association.

After his presentation of charges liberalism is creeping into the SBC, Pressler was challenged by Richard Jackson, pastor of North Phoenix Baptist Church.

"If all Southern Baptist work were like the work in the Arizona state convention, then we'd have no need whatsoever for a conservative movement in the Southern Baptist Convention," said Pressler, a leader in the inerrancy movement in the 14.3-million member denomination.

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He cited examples of what he called liberalism, mentioning specifically work by Roy L. Honeycutt, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Ky.; Temp Sparkman, professor at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Kansas City, Mo.; Henry Jackson (Jack) Flanders and Bob Patterson, religion professors at Baylor University, Waco, Texas, and Ann P. Rosser, co-pastor of Bainbridge-Southampton Baptist Church, Richmond, Va.

"I would define a liberal," he said, "as one who says that the original texts of Scripture can or do contain errors. A conservative is one who believes that the original texts of Scripture are exactly what God intended them to be. In that context I think 95 percent of Southern Baptists are conservative."

Pressler said the problem with "the other five percent" has occurred "because people in the ivory towers of intellectualism are not finding out what grassroots Southern Baptists believe and therefore are not addressing themselves to what their constituency believes."

"What is happening in the Southern Baptist Convention is merely this: Some of us have recognized that there is a problem. We have recognized that this problem is not going to go away unless something is done about it."

Pressler said after gaining an understanding of the SBC Constitution and the power of the president, "We found that conservatives have been fighting battles without knowing what the war was. We fought over the Broadman Bible Commentary, we fought over the Ralph Elliott situation, we fought over things like that because we didn't know how we could work within the system to rectify the problems."

Conservatives have the same right to work within the system as the liberals, Pressler said. "If Paige (Patterson) and I have made any contribution to the convention, it is explaining the manner in which the system works," he said.

He referred to Paige Patterson, president of Criswell Center for Biblical Studies in Dallas and associate pastor of First Baptist Church of Dallas, who has, with Pressler, been at the forefront of the effort to turn the denomination to a more conservative direction.

Pressler said the conservative movement is at a crucial state because the "liberals" are highly organized. "It is important that we attend the convention," he said. "It is important that every person vote his personal conviction because Southern Baptists have the opportunity to forge ahead, eliminating the few problems that we have, and to forge ahead as the greatest soul-winning group of people that God has ever had on the earth."

If Charles Stanley is reelected convention president in Dallas, Pressler said, "maybe the people in our institutions, the few who have not been listening, will realize where Southern Baptists are."

"If Dr. Stanley is defeated for reelection, then that will give carte-blanche to the liberals within our institutions not to be responsible to their constituency," he charged.

Stanley, pastor of First Baptist Church of Atlanta, was elected at the 1984 annual meeting of the SBC, and has said he will allow himself to be nominated for a second term as president at the upcoming Dallas convention.

During a question and answer session following the presentation, Jackson, pressured Pressler to say the opinions expressed were only the Texan's opinion. "We have had half information in this meeting in too many instances," Jackson said.

He contended there is another side to the issue and noted: "I am not saying either one is right, sir, I just simply believe that the people in Arizona are smart enough to understand that a lot of people have lost the sight of any cause in trying to win the fight."

Later, Jackson asked Pressler, "You wouldn't want me to tell all I know about the politics since this started, would you, Judge?"

Pressler replied: "I'd be delighted for you to tell anything you want to."

"No, no you wouldn't," Jackson said. "You don't want me to tell about when Bailey Smith called me and told me how long the meetings had been going on the spring before he was elected president in St. Louis and how it was set up for him to be elected."

Smith, pastor of First Southern Baptist Church, Del City, Okla., was elected on the first ballot at the 1980 annual meeting, and reelected despite a challenge at the 1981 convention.

Jackson concluded by saying: "All I want to do is say your cause, sir, is just and I respect you for it. (But) the methods whereby the cause is now being carried out have become overreactionary to the detriment of the convention and it's going on on both sides.

"I said that to Russell Dilday last week. He's gone too far. And I've said that to you."

Dilday, president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, Texas, has been a leader in efforts to defend the institutions and to counter the inerrancy movement.

Jackson added: "When you get down to the bottom line, the integrity of this whole deal is disintegrating vastly and nobody intends to, but you get so bent on a cause that you can forget where the means is and the means is not justified by the cause."

On the day following the Phoenix appearance, Pressler spoke to a group of about 20 pastors in First Southern Baptist Church of Tucson.

Pastor Ron Hart, both at the beginning of the hour and a half southern Arizona presentation and at its conclusion, told participants "to remember they were hearing only one side of the issue."

Following Pressler's presentation, Joe Hall, pastor of Twenty-Second Street Baptist Church in Tucson, said: "I have a real concern that we are spending an awful lot of time in the political warfare among ourselves.

"We may end up in the same route and the same place that some of the denominations you (Pressler) have mentioned...simply because we get gobbled up in the politics of this whole thing. I think that is a predominant feeling amongst a lot of folks."

Pressler asked Hall: "Do you think we have problems? Do you think these things I have cited today are problems?"

Hall responded: "I see those as problems because I happen to agree wholeheartedly with your interpretation of how we ought to interpret Scripture. But I am not so sure that we have a problem that is commensurate with the level of politics."

Pressler said: "Is it political for me to come here and to share with you what is on my heart?... Some people might consider my appearance today political. I consider it informational."

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(Elizabeth Young is associate editor of the Baptist Beacon, newsjournal of the Arizona Southern Baptist Convention.)

BJC-N

High Court To Hear Appeal Of
Blind Ministerial Student

By Stan Haste

Baptist Press
4/3/85

WASHINGTON (BP)—The U.S. Supreme Court will decide during its next term if a blind man preparing for a career in the ministry is entitled to federal and state vocational rehabilitation funds on an equal basis with other applicants.

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Confronting the justices is a decision by the Washington (State) Supreme Court that Larry Witters, a Seattle man who is studying theology at two religious schools, may not receive the funds. That panel last year prohibited granting the money, ruling in part that to do so would have the primary effect of advancing religion in violation of the First Amendment's ban on an establishment of religion.

Witters was first denied the assistance when the state Commission for the Blind adopted a policy that Washington's constitution "forbids the use of public funds to assist an individual in the pursuit of a career or degree in theology or related areas."

An initial administrative review upheld the new policy, as did a Spokane County superior court judge and the state supreme court.

But in papers filed with the nation's high court, Witters' attorney asked the justices to review those findings, warning that "the Commission for the Blind's excessive zeal to separate church and state under the Establishment Clause, appears to have created a clear-cut Free Exercise violation."

(The First Amendment both forbids a governmental "establishment of religion" and guarantees "free exercise" of religion.)

"This Court," Farris wrote, "needs to give further consideration to the important principle of keeping the Establishment Clause in balance with the Free Exercise Clause."

Recalling the high court's decision two years ago upholding Nebraska's practice of paying a Presbyterian chaplain to offer prayer each day for the state legislature, Farris added: "Larry Witters could be employed by the State of Washington as a minister, either in the legislature or as a prison chaplain. It seems a bit inconsistent to allow a person to be employed as a minister using tax funds, yet prohibit an individual from using a neutral vocational rehabilitation program to be trained for said vocation."

Witters is pursuing his education at the Inland Empire School of the Bible, a nondenominational Christian school, and at Whitworth College, an accredited Presbyterian institution. He hopes to become a pastor, missionary or Christian youth worker.

Because the Supreme Court's calendar for the current term is full, Witters' appeal will be held over for the new term beginning in October. (84-1070, Witters v. State of Washington Commission for the Blind)

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CORRECTION: In BP story "Bush Trip Benefits Anti-Hunger Movement," mailed 3/26/85, please change the word Nigeria to Niger in paragraphs five and six.

Thanks,
Baptist Press
