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Peace Committee Dominates
State Newspaper Editorials

By Marv Knox

NASHVILLE (BP)--The Southern Baptist Convention Peace Committee dominated editorial pages of the denomination's state newspapers in the wake of the SBC annual meeting June 16-18.

"The Peace Committee report was the most significant action of our 130th annual meeting," wrote Fletcher Allen of Maryland-Delaware. "A Baptist convention is primarily a business meeting, and taking top billing on the business agenda in St. Louis was the report of the SBC Peace Committee," echoed Presnall Wood of Texas, expressing a theme repeated by his colleagues.

The peace report culminated two years of study by the 22-member committee, created at the 1985 SBC annual meeting in Dallas. The committee was asked to determine the causes of and suggest solutions to the theological/political controversy within the convention, and it offered its findings and recommendations during this year's St. Louis meeting.

Those recommendations "mark the path for taking steps to deal with the theological and political problems that have plagued our convention for the past several years," wrote Glenn Brown of Oklahoma. "Our problems are not solved yet, and there are no easy solutions. But we are intact as a convention."

"Southern Baptists are deeply indebted to the members of the Peace Committee," said Louisiana's Lynn Clayton. "They did not work the miracle of bringing peace, but they did help us focus on the specifics of our problems, and they have offered recommendations that can be of significant benefit if properly implemented."

"The Peace Committee is to be commended for having done what some skeptics had said would never happen. It presented a report with substance, and did it without dissent from its ranks," noted John Roberts of South Carolina. He called the absence of a minority presentation "the most hopeful note of the report."

Added Bill Webb of Illinois: "Peace Committee members representing the whole theological spectrum of Southern Baptists believe it the best report they could submit. While no document can guarantee peace, this one can be used to help realize peace. ..."

On the other hand, the report "will not add to the peace so desperately needed in Southern Baptist circles," countered R.G. Puckett of North Carolina. "The lengthy report appears to favor the Pressler-Patterson Coalition (of more conservative Southern Baptists) in its ongoing effort to control the convention. Some of the leaders in that group hailed the report as a victory."

The latter claim was mirrored by Indiana's David Simpson in a favorable assessment: "The Peace Committee report was thorough, fair and helpful. Some challenge came from the floor, but each was turned back with resounding ease. The report appeared to favor conservatives in that it reflected what they have said is the source and solution to the controversy."

Some of the editors expressed reservations concerning how the report -- which was approved by an estimated 95 percent majority -- would be utilized following the convention.

"Committee Chairman Charles Fuller said the report is not and should not be considered a creed, but it is inevitable that interpretation of the report could be used by some as a creedal tool in an attempt to correct and control," wrote Wood of Texas. Added Kentucky's Jack Sanford, "No matter what it is called, (it) is a creed because it forces all who wish to continue in the mainstream to conform to a certain statement about the Bible."

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A majority of editors also scored the report for a recommendation that continued the life of the committee for up to three years to observe SBC agencies and officers "in an effort to encourage compliance and foster harmonious working relationships" in the convention.

"That makes it a watchdog committee," said Don McGregor of Mississippi. "We have never had such a thing as that. It is recognized that these are difficult times, but the use of the committee in such a role is a questionable application."

Said Everett Sneed of Arkansas: "We agree this is not the function of the Peace Committee. However, it is extremely unlikely that the committee could function in this manner, since it is so closely balanced."

Missouri's Bob Terry noted: "Peace Committee Chairman Charles Fuller said presidential appointments is one of the areas the Peace Committee will continue to monitor. That was an encouraging announcement."

Several editors also expressed reservations about a recommendation that suggests "trustees determine the theological positions of the seminary administrators and faculty members. ..."

"The proper role and function of trustees is to set policy which is then to be implemented by administration. This unfortunate and drastic proposal would alter this procedure and involve trustees in matters for which many, if not most, of them are not at all prepared by training or experience," wrote Virginia's Julian Pentecost.

"Implementation ... agency by agency may set a tone for state conventions, associations and even local churches," warned Jack Harwell of Georgia. "We need to pray earnestly and review history before rushing to enforce varying degrees of uniformity and conformity -- in the name of peace."

Pentecost and Tennessee's Charlie Warren cited as unreasonable a recommendation that, among other things, called for discontinuation of "information/ideological" meetings within SBC groups. "That's a wonderful idea, but Baptists have always organized peripheral groups. We don't think they'll stop now," Warren wrote. Added Pentecost: "The tragic message is loud and clear. A denomination birthed and nurtured by Christian dissenters is now controlled by persons who are determined not to tolerate dissent or those identified with it."

At least two editors said the report did not go far enough in some areas.

Indiana's Simpson noted the report cited theological imbalance at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. He questioned why Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary was not included. Simpson previously has editorialized against Temp Sparkman, a Midwestern religious education professor whom he charges with liberalism. Simpson said the Peace Committee has not searched to find Midwestern's "entangled, misleading and sticky web."

On another front, Wood of Texas said, "Regretfully, the report did not deal with some needed structural changes in the convention nor were names of people mentioned, whether they were professors or denominational politicians, who were considered causes of the controversy."

Editors also expressed frustration with the lateness of the availability of the committee's report. Convention messengers only received the document some 14 hours prior to presentation of the report, not weeks in advance, as previously was indicated.

"A report bearing the status of the Peace Committee's two-year study merits more than a few cursory hours of perusal. For whatever reason, the delay was a hindrance to messengers' understanding and being given enough time for proper study and a knowledgeable vote," said Maryland-Delaware's Allen, echoing sentiments presented by several of his colleagues.

Taken as a whole, the editors generally praised the committee and Chairman Fuller. "The report reflected what I believe were honest attempts to express deeply-held convictions that represent a wide spectrum of viewpoints," said Hudson Baggett of Alabama. "Perhaps the report was the best that could have come," noted Wood of Texas.

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Looking to the future, the editors expressed hope tinged with concern. "The Peace Committee is on target when it points out that the nature of our diversity and the rightful place of biblical interpretation can protect from unwanted extremes," wrote Jack Brymer of Florida. "Apparently, 90 percent of the messengers agreed. Baptists want peace with fairness and diversity. It is now time for action, not rhetoric."

"By accepting the Peace Committee report in its entirety, the SBC declared itself to be one body," said the Northwest's James Watters. "By refusing to get entangled in debate about amendments and deletions, the SBC recognized that the direction has already been set by Wisdom greater than our own."

"We hope and pray that individual Southern Baptists will be as intent in following all recommendations of the report as we are in seeing that institutions, agencies and commissions comply," said Clayton of Louisiana. "If we are, the Peace Committee may well have instituted a process through which reconciliation, and peace as the absence of hostilities, can come."

Editors Reflect
On '87 Convention

By Marv Knox

Baptist Press
7/9/87

NASHVILLE (BP)--Southern Baptists' annual meeting in St. Louis this summer was more positive and upbeat than recent meetings, according to editors of the denomination's state newspapers.

Writing in editorials immediately following the June 16-18 meeting, the editors generally gave the spirit of the convention high marks, but some questioned that assessment.

A "sweeter spirit seemed to prevail," said Charlie Warren of Tennessee. Added Everett Sneed of Arkansas: "The 1987 convention ... was mostly a positive meeting. It was marked by good preaching, great music and good conduct on the part of both messengers and the host city."

"The St. Louis convention was peaceful and positive," noted David Simpson of Indiana. "At the 1985 and '86 conventions in Dallas and Atlanta, respectively, the tension near the platform was heavy, the floor debate was rancorous and the newsroom busy with reporters reaching record numbers. None of this was the case in St. Louis."

"The mood of the convention was not as hostile or intense as the two preceding years," agreed R.G. Puckett of North Carolina. But he countered: "The quality of the conventions has been steadily declining in the past years, and 1987 did not disrupt the pattern. The typical messenger who longs for the 'good old days' when it was a joy and pleasure to attend the conventions would acknowledge that St. Louis did not have the pain and stress of Dallas or Atlanta, but it was not like earlier years. ..."

Editors reflected on the St. Louis meeting's place in the midst of the theological/political struggle that has engulfed the Southern Baptist Convention for the past eight years.

"Maybe the St. Louis convention was a harbinger of better days ahead," said Mississippi's Don McGregor. "Maybe it was simply the eye of the storm, leaving us facing more turbulence in the future."

"As Southern Baptists left St. Louis, most left encouraged. They had experienced a convention of restraint, for the most part," wrote Bob Terry of Missouri. Jack Harwell of Georgia said: "'The Spirit of St. Louis' was referred to several times. ... In our humble opinion, that spirit can be summarized, 'We cry peace, peace, when there is no peace.'"

Editors also offered opinions for what they viewed to be the mood of the denomination.

"Where do we go from here?" asked Hudson Baggett of Alabama. "Southern Baptists have the greatest opportunity ever to be a good influence in the world. But in order to have such influence, we must stop fighting each other."

Ohio's Theo Sommerkamp suggested the peaceful facade of St. Louis may belie deep-seated tension. "If there is any fighting between rival factions in the denomination, it may be now entering the stage of guerrilla activity rather than be played out in the open," he wrote.

After noting the latest annual meeting was more calm than its predecessors, Simpson of Indiana said: "Then why the peace? The same reason as peace existed prior to 1979. Prior to that year the group resisting change, the moderates, were in leadership. Now the group initiating change, the conservatives, is in leadership. Peace has not resulted primarily from reconciliation but a predominance in leadership."

Echoed James Watters of the Northwest: "The old genteel oligarchy is gone, and I sincerely doubt that the group in charge right now has the savvy or the clout to establish a new one. And for those of us who are dyed-in-the-wool populists, we're glad to see the balance of power finally moving back to where it belongs -- to the people."

Along similar lines, the editors took a look at politics and the presidency in the SBC.

"Messengers ... caught up with the giant wheel that carries our cooperative efforts as a denomination and gave it a firm nudge to the right that will more decisively set its course for the years immediately ahead," noted Oklahoma's Glenn Brown. "With the re-election of (Adrian) Rogers as president, the plan to secure sufficient control of convention agency and institutions boards to turn the convention to a more conservative stance is now fully assured."

Added Julian Pentecost of Virginia: "A considerably above-average person in intelligence and an able articulator, Rogers has been one of the most visible and outspoken leaders of the fundamental-conservatives in the convention. He is a committed inerrantist and has vowed that in his third term as president, as in the past, he will appoint only those persons whose interpretation of inerrancy is the same as his."

Jack Brymer of Florida noted the re-election of Rogers over challenger Richard Jackson was an important aspect of the convention and stressed "the 60-40 percentage vote for an incumbent president reveals that the body is still deeply divided over the issues of fairness and diversity within its ranks."

Despite the expression of such concerns, the editors praised Rogers for the way he presided over the annual meeting.

"Our own native son, Adrian Rogers, did a commendable job presiding this year. We believe he tried to be fair," said Charlie Warren of Tennessee. "Rogers gets good marks for running a smooth convention," added Bill Webb of Illinois, and Missouri's Terry noted Rogers "did an excellent job presiding, as he always does."

Other editorial topics included:

-- Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs. Messengers approved a fact-finding committee's report on the SBC's relationship to the nine-denomination body, based in Washington. Included was a bylaw modification that changed and preserved Southern Baptists' relationship to the BJCPA.

"We commend the committee for its decision to recommend the continuation of funding" of the BJCPA, said Sneed of Arkansas. He questioned, however, future relationships between the Baptist Joint Committee and the newly strengthened SBC Public Affairs Committee, through which Southern Baptist support for and membership in the BJCPA is channeled.

Tennessee's Warren spoke to that concern: "We commend the decision to continue ties with the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs. Southern Baptists, under the new plan, will have stronger representation and also will have the option of speaking independently when we differ with other Baptist bodies."

-- Women. "There are several indications that women are becoming second-class members" of the SBC, Sneed wrote. Added Mississippi's McGregor: "Both the Woman's Missionary Union and Women in Ministry are chafing under the lack of recognition on the part of those in power. The WMU questions the lack of women on the boards, agencies and institutions of the convention. The Women in Ministry feel they have been shut out."

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-- Resolutions, including eight that were approved without discussion. "The decision to approve without reading or discussion several resolutions dealing with controversial subjects was unwise and is another illustration of the extent to which democratic process has become compromised" in the SBC, wrote Virginia's Pentecost.

-- Evangelist Billy Graham, who spoke the final day of the meeting. "The spiritual highlight for many messengers may have been Billy Graham's sermon Thursday morning. Hearing Graham is always a highlight," said Missouri's Terry.

-- Pat Robertson, whose presidential campaigners circulated petitions and supporters hosted a reception in St. Louis. "Such blatant exploitation of Southern Baptists for secular political purposes has never happened before, and we predict it will backfire on Robertson," said Puckett of North Carolina.

-- The Cooperative Program, the SBC's voluntary unified budget. "Nothing should be allowed to stand in the way of genuine cooperation in missions, Christian education, evangelism and other traditional ministries. The Cooperative Program is recognized as the lifeline of financial support," said Oklahoma's Brown.

-- Hope. "Perhaps Southern Baptists really did turn a corner in St. Louis," wrote Terry of Missouri. "Perhaps characteristics like competence, compromise, conciliation and concern are elements in the solution of convention conflict."

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Survey Reveals TV Preachers
Losing People's Confidence

By Eric Fox

Baptist Press
7/9/87

WASHINGTON (BP)--A growing number of Americans believe television evangelists are dishonest, insincere, uncaring and do not have a "special relationship with God," according to a recent Gallup survey.

The survey revealed a sharp reversal of public opinion toward television preachers compared to a similar study taken in 1980. The survey was released recently by Gallup's Princeton Religion Research Center of Princeton, N.J. The center said the figures suggest the recent scandals among television evangelists have "cast a long shadow" over many of the nation's most popular evangelists and "the cause of organized religion as a whole may have been harmed."

Only 23 percent of respondents stated TV evangelists were "trustworthy with money," while 63 percent said they were not; the 1980 survey showed 41 percent said they were trustworthy, while 36 percent said they were not. Nearly all surveyed in 1987 (92 percent) stated that as a result of recent scandals "religious organizations should make full disclosure of the funds they receive and how they are spent."

The number of people who said TV evangelists are dishonest more than doubled from 26 percent in 1980 to 53 percent in 1987. Fifty-one percent of the respondents said televangelists are insincere, and 38 percent said they "don't care about people," compared to 25 percent and 21 percent, respectively, seven years ago. The percentage of those who said TV evangelists "do not have a special relationship with God" jumped from 33 percent in 1980 to 63 percent in 1987.

Respondents also rated evangelists individually and, with the exception of Billy Graham, all listed dropped in favor with the American public. Former PTL host Jim Bakker suffered the most serious drop, as 77 percent gave "unfavorable" responses; over half (58 percent) viewed him favorably seven years ago. Other evangelists who showed a decline in support since 1980 included Oral Roberts, Jimmy Swaggart, Pat Robertson, Robert Schuller and Rex Humbard. Jerry Falwell was not included in the 1980 survey but received unfavorable responses from 62 percent of the 1987 respondents.

With regards to the 1988 presidential election, the number of respondents likely to vote for a presidential candidate who considers himself a "born-again, evangelical Christian" dropped 20 points in the last seven years, although a majority of Americans continue to say religious status would not make any difference.

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(Eric Fox is a summer intern in the Washington bureau of Baptist Press and a student at Oklahoma Baptist University in Shawnee.)

Report Suggests Possibility
Of Taxing Investment Income

By Kathy Palen

WASHINGTON (BP)--A staff report issued by the House Ways and Means Committee and Joint Committee on Taxation suggests the imposition of a 5 percent excise tax on the investment income of tax-exempt organizations -- including religious organizations -- as a possible means of increasing revenue for the federal budget.

Such action, the report said, would generate more than \$15 billion over a three-year period.

Under current tax law, private foundations generally pay a 2 percent excise tax on their net investment income. Although originally imposed to help offset the cost of administering tax laws relating to exempt organizations, the current tax now generates revenues exceeding the total Internal Revenue Service costs of administering the total exempt organization program.

The proposed 5 percent excise tax would be levied on the net investment income of all tax-exempt organizations, including religious, charitable, educational and scientific organizations, social welfare organizations, and labor unions and trade associations.

In arguing for the proposal, the staff report stated in times of large federal budget deficits all organizations that benefit from federal government expenditures should be called upon to contribute to reducing the deficits. The report specified the proposed excise tax would not apply to non-investment income, such as membership dues, charitable contributions or related business income, and would be "sunsetted" so that it would not apply once the budget deficit was reduced to a specific level.

The report conceded imposition of such a tax, which would break tradition with past practice relating to exempt organizations, would reduce the funds available to and needed by those organizations and thus adversely affect those benefitting from the organizations' programs.

A panel of representatives from tax-exempt organizations testified during three days of House hearings on the 291-page staff report, which contains a wide range of possible options for increasing revenues.

Brian O'Connell, president of Independent Sector, told the joint congressional panel that non-profit organizations during the past six years have faced a major increase in service caseloads and expectations because of reductions in federal spending, a dramatic reduction in government financial support for their services and a reduction in private contributions triggered by the Tax Reform Act of 1986.

O'Connell, whose organization is made up of 654 national voluntary associations, foundations and corporate giving programs, argued the proposed excise tax would further reduce the capacity of voluntary groups to fulfill their public service.

In addition to calling the proposed tax "absurd and cruel," O'Connell said it would be contradictory to the underlying concept of tax-exempt organizations.

Mahlon W. Hessey, a representative of the Shriners Hospitals for Crippled Children, voiced his belief that the proposal would "do lasting harm to the charitable sector, extract only modest revenues -- by government standards -- to fund various government programs, and bring to an end a tradition of support and encouragement for charitable services which government previously enhanced through its tax policies or by direct financial assistance."

Throughout the hearings, several committee members reminded the witnesses and their own colleagues that the various proposals were indeed only proposals and many -- including the 5 percent excise tax -- are likely to be dropped or altered.