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Southern Baptists
concerned over film

By Dan Martin

NASHVILLE (BP)--In increasing numbers, Southern Baptists are expressing concern over a controversial yet-to-be-released film called "The Last Temptation of Christ."

The movie, by filmmaker Martin Scorsese and based on a novel by Nikos Kazantzakis, is scheduled to be released this fall by Universal Pictures and Cineplex Odeon Films.

The film has been criticized by such organizations as Donald Wildmon's American Family Association and James Dobson's Focus on the Family. Wildmon said he has sent copies of the script to 200 denominational leaders and has contacted 170,000 pastors. He said he is planning a mailing on the movie to 2.5 million people.

Dobson has featured the movie on his broadcast on several occasions. Complaints about the movie also have surfaced on several other national broadcasts. Some religious leaders reportedly have called for the film to be destroyed.

Editor Presnall Wood of the Baptist Standard, newsjournal of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, told Baptist Press Southern Baptists in increasing numbers are calling and writing about the controversial film. "We have had a number of calls and letters, and this is one of those things which is going to continue to provoke controversy," he said, adding he has devoted his editorial page to the matter in the July 20 issue.

Editor Jack E. Brymer Sr. of the Florida Baptist Witness, newsjournal of the Florida Baptist Convention, said material on the film is circulating in Florida, including a copy of what purports to be excerpts from the script.

"We already are receiving calls, which is a good indication Southern Baptists are becoming very concerned," he said. "My concern is that we have accurate facts before mobilizing the troops."

Wildmon told Baptist Press he has not seen the film but has a copy of an earlier script. "I also have talked with people who reviewed a later script, and they are very similar," he said.

The film, he said, "presents Jesus as a mentally unstable person who fights being the Son of God, a sinner who doesn't know who will pay for his sins, a person who lashes out at the sick and poor, a traitor to the Jews, one who lusts after Mary Magdalene and a bigamist." The movie also reportedly features nudity and sexual scenes.

"Specific instances (in the script) are irrelevant," Wildmon said. "The general thrust of the movie is blasphemous. We are asking people to call Universal and ask them not to release the film. Then we are asking people to call their local theaters and out of respect for Christians in the local community not to show the film."

He said he began protesting the film in December 1987 but "backed off when they said they would let us screen it. They (Universal) told us it would honor our Lord, but when they put off the screening time, I backed off and did not attend the screening" held in New York July 12.

Wildmon maintained Universal has two versions of the movie and charged what religious leaders saw at the screening is a "work in progress" with the more objectionable scenes deleted.

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The movie was screened as a "rough cut," to 40 to 50 religious leaders in New York. No press representatives were allowed to participate.

Evelyn Dukovic, executive vice president of Morality in Media, told Baptist Press she attended the screening: "I found it extremely offensive. It pictures Christ as a sort of fearful, apprehensive, weak person. This is not the historical figure of Christ, and that really offended me.

"There was nudity, and in a dream sequence presenting Jesus as marrying Mary Magdalene, there is a sex scene," said Dukovic, a Catholic. "The film is not only objectionable but extremely offensive to any believing Christian. What I saw was a rough cut, but I don't see how they could ever make this palatable for believing Christians."

Robert L. Maddox, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State in Silver Spring, Md., and a Southern Baptist minister, also told Baptist Press he has seen the movie. He agreed with Dukovic the movie will never be acceptable "to the person in the pew; it will be offensive."

He added he knew very little about the film and had "missed the brouhaha" which has arisen. "I am not recommending that people see the film, but it does have its commendable points," he said. "For me, the film focuses on the struggle of Jesus to do the will of God. He does it, but it is painful for him.

"(The biblical book of) Hebrews tells us Jesus was tempted in all ways like we are. In the film, Jesus never questioned his Sonship and is aware from the beginning he is unique. In several places he asks why he can't have a normal life, marry and have children. He is reluctantly willing to bear the burden. Nobody could be very excited about dying on a cross."

Maddox added the movie contains nudity and fairly explicit sex scenes, particularly a dream sequence in which Jesus is tempted to come down off the cross, save himself, marry Mary Magdalene and have children.

The church-state separation specialist was told of Wildmon's claim the more objectionable parts had been deleted from the rough cut shown July 12. "There is enough in this for Christians to be concerned, but not enough to picket or go into orbit," Maddox said. "But if it was skewed or material was deleted, I would be very mad that I had been used in that way."

A spokesman for Universal Studios in Hollywood declined to answer specific questions about the movie, particularly if two versions exist. Instead, he read a statement from Universal Pictures and Ceneplex Odeon Films.

The statement says filmmaker Scorsese "expects to deliver the finished film ... in mid-August" and adds the movie will be released in the fall.

The statement also says: "In the last few days, some fundamentalist leaders have attacked the film, stating clearly that their goal is to have the film destroyed. These individuals declined an invitation to see the film and consequently what they are saying is inaccurate and exaggerated.

"The filmmaker deeply believes that this film is a religious affirmation of faith."

The statement adds: "In America, we have a long tradition of freedom of the press, speech and religion. Each individual has a right to express his own religious beliefs through books, film and art. The opponents of this film are calling for its destruction. This is censorship.

"People have a right to choose for themselves whether or not to see this movie and to form their own opinions about it. Universal Pictures and Ceneplex Odeon Films stand behind the principle of freedom of expression and hope that the American public will give the film and the filmmaker a fair chance."

Call for Willett's resignation
prompts Missouri board response

By Trennis Henderson

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. (BP)--The recent call for the resignation of Missouri Southern Baptist foreign missionary Michael E. Willett has prompted a response by the Missouri Baptist Convention executive board.

The issue surfaced during the board's July 12 meeting when George Steincross, the pastor of Willett's home church, presented an appeal for fellow board members to express "prayerful support" of Willett's "sense of call and training for missions ministry in teaching."

The motion by Steincross, pastor of Second Baptist Church in Liberty, also called for expressing to the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board "our grave concern about the implications of requesting Dr. Michael Willett to resign."

Steincross' motion, introduced during the board's discussion of miscellaneous business, caught several board members off guard. "Things are developing. I don't know the facts," pointed out John Hughes, pastor of First Baptist Church of Independence. "I don't want us to vote down something we should pass, and I don't want us to pass something we would wish tomorrow we hadn't."

Rick Wadley, pastor of First Baptist Church of Mt. Vernon, noted: "My feelings are that I would tend to want to be supportive of (Willett) and affirm him, but I don't know what his doctrinal position is. ... I would like to share with him that we're praying for him during this difficult time."

Board Chairman Charles Hufft, pastor of Macedonia Baptist Church in Springfield, cautioned: "There are problems both ways. Either way on this thing, the gun's loaded. ... We need to think really carefully right now."

Following continued discussion, Hughes requested a brief recess to allow time to formulate a substitute motion. Hufft appointed Hughes, Steincross, Wadley and Verna Haun, a member of First Baptist Church of Bolivar, to draft the substitute.

Following the recess, Steincross introduced the three-point substitute motion. Adopted by the board without opposition, the motion expressed "prayerful support to Dr. Willett as a person in these difficult circumstances." The action also voiced "concern to the Foreign Mission Board about the way the charges were brought (against Willett), especially in light of his recent appointment in an increasingly tight appointive process."

Reiterating concern over the circumstances surrounding initial charges against Willett, the motion concluded by expressing "profound concern" about the implications for future Southern Baptist foreign missions efforts if such actions are repeated.

Specific concerns centered on the fact that Michael McGinnis, one of Willett's fellow missionaries, wrote to friends in Tennessee with complaints about Willett's beliefs.

McGinnis, a graduate of Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary in Memphis, Tenn., wrote: "From what I hear, (Willett) is not an isolated case. Perhaps I can do something about the situation here."

Don Kammerdiener, FMB vice president for the Americas, told Word & Way, newsjournal of the Missouri Baptist Convention, that McGinnis' actions marked the first time in recent FMB history that a missionary had sought to involve board members in a campaign against a fellow missionary. Kammerdiener said McGinnis has been disciplined for going outside proper FMB channels to express his concerns.

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In his comments to the Missouri Baptist executive board, Steincross noted, "The first year that other than Southern Baptist seminary-trained persons have been appointed (as Southern Baptist foreign missionaries), a graduate of Mid-America Seminary has called into question Michael Willett's theology." Steincross warned Baptists "have now been shown what can happen when unaccredited persons join the missionary ranks to 'do something about the situation.'"

Along with being a Missouri native and growing up as a member of Second Church in Liberty, Willett is a graduate of William Jewell College in Liberty. He has been a part-time instructor at William Jewell and taught one course as an adjunct professor at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Mo.

Willett was appointed as a foreign missionary in April 1987 to serve as a seminary teacher in Venezuela. He was studying in language school in Costa Rica when he was asked to resign. Action by FMB trustees on Willett's status will come July 18-21 during a board meeting in Glorieta, N.M.

Emphasizing the need for personal ministry from fellow Missouri Baptists, Wadley encouraged board members to send Willett "personal notes and letters to let him know you are praying for him."

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Lynn calls for college,
state convention covenant

By Tim Fields

Baptist Press
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GREENVILLE, S.C. (BP)--Covenant relationships between Southern Baptist schools and state conventions are vital to surviving a coming crisis in Southern Baptist higher education, Robert Lynn told college administrators meeting in Greenville, S.C.

Lynn, president of Louisiana College and outgoing president of the Association of Southern Baptist Schools and Colleges, called for establishment of the covenant relationships in an address to college presidents and deans during the association's annual meeting.

"These are critical days in Southern Baptist higher education, by far the most serious in the 21 years since I have been working at it, and I suspect the most challenging to Southern Baptist colleges since the day-to-day survival mode during the Great Depression," Lynn said.

"A stalled economy has diminished our endowments and, together with new tax laws, have made fund raising as tough as nails. Governments and/or courts year by year project new threats to our independence, as church-related educational institutions and proprietary schools, posing as colleges and even universities, fill the airways with bogus educational claims."

Lynn also blamed the coming crisis on "at risk" public school systems that "pour into our colleges high school graduates who must be retaught the basics before they can negotiate our curricula."

"Demographics warn that we will be overwhelmed with minorities in the years to come, yet our schools recruit embarrassingly few minority students. Global mission opportunities are laid in our laps, but most of us don't know how to pick them up.

"But the most uncontested major challenge to our Baptist colleges and universities ... is the threatened change in the nature and character of our governing boards," Lynn said.

"The struggle for control of the Southern Baptist Convention is virtually complete. The new leadership now owns a majority on almost every SBC board. Our seminaries are experiencing radical changes and pressures that are too comprehensive and profound to enumerate and understand at this time."

Lynn told the educators, representing 55 of the 71 Southern Baptist schools and colleges, that he wished he could tell them when their institutions will be directly affected and how.

"I can't, and I don't believe anyone can," he said. "I offer no political advice. But I do suggest one way we can begin to prepare for this impending threat.

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"My thesis is that Southern Baptist colleges and universities can be helped to live through the coming crisis with integrity and relative stability through a new emphasis on the covenant relationship between our schools and sponsoring bodies.

"Covenant should be a welcome term to Baptists. As with Abraham of old, we are a covenant people, chosen by God under the covenant of the blood of the Lamb, called to go, to make disciples, to teach and to baptize."

At the center of a healthy relationship between colleges and the convention is the recognition that a college and a church are not identical in their purposes, methods of approach and composition of membership, but each contributes to the Christian mission in the world, he said.

In most states, the documents that describe this relationship are skimpy and deal primarily with legal necessities such as ownership, liability and audits, he added.

"All of these are essential, but a covenant runs much deeper," Lynn said. "My hope is that our Baptist colleges and conventions will talk together in these pre-crisis days to explore in depth our covenant relationship one with the other, and in so doing deal frankly now in civility and in love with issues that could divide us later."

Because institutions vary so much from state to state and even within states, a national covenant document would not work, Lynn said, but he added certain elements will be common to all.

Each state convention must work with its colleges to define or update its own covenant, he said. He offered guidelines for what a Baptist school should pledge to its convention and what churches, through the state convention, should promise to their colleges and universities.

A Baptist college covenants with Baptists:

- To hold up as the highest wisdom the truth of Jesus Christ.
- To provide quality, person-centered education.
- To train young adults for leadership in the churches and in society.
- To be sensitive to and to support where appropriate the goals of the convention.
- To develop policies and conduct programs consistent with the policies and beliefs of Baptists.
- To employ as full-time faculty and staff members people who are committed to Christ and understand and agree with the goals of Christian education.
- To develop and maintain a total campus environment conducive to spiritual as well as intellectual growth.

A Baptist convention covenants with a school:

- To select good trustees and to allow them to perform their roles.
- To provide financial support befitting the importance of Christian education.
- To recommend and encourage Baptist young adults to consider attending a Baptist college.
- To endow the future of the Baptist college.
- To be sensitive to the Baptist college's role on the cutting edge of knowledge.

Lynn said if Baptist colleges and state Baptist conventions define their covenants, they "will be reaching out for one another in troubled times; and in reaching and drawing near, we will discover new vitality, new resources and new effectiveness for the task of Christian education."

1,200-plus responded
to SBC missions call

RICHMOND, Va. (BP)--Some of the 1,200-plus people who signed commitment cards for foreign missions at June's Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting in San Antonio, Texas, could become missionaries as soon as early 1989.

More than 1,200 people signed commitment cards after the June 15 evening convention session, during which 35 new missionaries were appointed and Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board President R. Keith Parks delivered a missions challenge.

A breakdown of the cards showed 166 people will explore a career in missions, 43 are willing to serve between four months and two years overseas and 51 are willing to volunteer up to four months. Another 688 said they will pray regularly for missions, 390 promised to increase financial support of missions and 717 will influence their churches toward greater missions support.

This is an excellent response, said Bill Morgan, director of the board's missionary enlistment department. The department has contacted all of the people interested in missionary careers.

"We'll continue to work with all of them as long as they show an interest," Morgan said, adding commitment cards still are coming in by mail. Staff members are getting information about the potential missionaries' education, experience, number and age of children and other data.

Morgan said he just wrote a letter to a married couple who already meet basic qualifications for missionary candidacy. "It's remotely possible some of these could be appointed missionaries by December," he said. Others could be appointed in early 1989.

Southern Baptists need a revival of missions interest if the Bold Mission Thrust campaign to reach the world for Christ is to be accomplished, Morgan said, and this response may indicate a revival is starting. To fuel a revival, "pastors must be missions-minded," he said. "People will never rise any higher in missions interest than their pastor."