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Baptists Committed
speak to SBC issues

By Dan Martin

N-CO

NASHVILLE (BP)--Centrist Baptists spelled out their positions on issues confronting the Southern Baptist Convention during a national symposium in Nashville May 2-3.

About 150 participants heard presentations from two denominational executives, a layman and four pastors in the "Here We Stand" conference, sponsored by Baptists Committed to the Southern Baptist Convention, an organization of "centrist" Baptists formed in late 1988.

Topics concerned Scripture, the priesthood of the believer, local-church autonomy, separation of church and state and the current state of the 14.7-million-member denomination.

Participants also heard presentations from the pastor expected to be their standard bearer in the 1989 annual meeting of the SBC, June 13-15 in Las Vegas, Nev. Daniel Vestal, 44, pastor of Dunwoody Baptist Church in suburban Atlanta, made a formal presentation and held two question-and-answer sessions. (See separate story.)

W. Winfred Moore, chairman of Baptists Committed and pastor of First Baptist Church of Amarillo, Texas, told participants he was glad such an organization as Baptists Committed exists but noted reluctance for the fight by quoting war correspondent Ernie Pyle, who wrote, "There is no sense in this struggle, but there is no choice but to struggle."

He urged participants to "do what can be done to bring this convention back to its historic principles and practices; back to the kind of convention my mother thought it was when she brought the tithe of her egg money ... brought a 10th jar of everything she canned to church to be sent to what we called the orphans' home.

"Get your messengers together from your church and your area. As much as you and I dislike the idea, it is still a fact -- and we didn't make it that fact -- the only thing that really counts anymore is the number of votes in the house when the election (for president) is held.

"Let's get our people to Las Vegas. Let's keep them in the house until the vote has been taken. Don't let them go somewhere else when we need them to cast a vote. It is not simply to win an election; we need them in the house to reclaim a convention."

David Currie, field coordinator of Baptists Committed from Houston, told participants they can turn the convention around in Las Vegas, but if they don't then, then they can in New Orleans, Atlanta and Indianapolis (sites of the 1990, 1991 and 1992 annual meetings).

The keynote address on "Here We Stand" was delivered by Nashville pastor Bill Sherman of Woodmont Baptist Church. The symposium, he said, was intended to "reinterpret what it has always meant to be all Baptist, what we believe and how we go about the sacred work of the church."

"We believe this reaffirmation is essential today, for the last 10 years has seen a disturbing erosion of many of the great biblical truths of our Baptist heritage," he said.

"Baptists historically have accepted each other and worked well together. Our history is not a Camelot, yet a strong trust and goodwill have been felt for other Baptists throughout the years."

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"Acceptance was always the rule. However, such is in jeopardy today. There are Baptists among us who make no bones about controlling the denomination. They have stated their goal. They have worked their plan. Such a divisive climate has been cultivated by those who wish to sow distrust and slander those who do not go along with their program of change. The present denominational climate is a great tragedy. It is filled with distrust, manipulation, secrecy, slander and disparagement. It must change."

Sherman noted that "10 years ago a movement was begun by some supposedly to save our denomination," and asked if Southern Baptists "are better off today ... than we were in 1979?"

"Then," he said, "our mission gifts were climbing every year. Now, our Cooperative Program (the SBC's unified giving plan) budget is frozen, and gifts are on the decline."

Sherman repeated a litany of how "things were in 1979" and contrasted them with how they are now. His recitation included seminary enrollment, academic freedom in Baptist colleges and the decline of special offerings for foreign and home missions. All, he said, are worse off now.

"Then, a climate of trust and acceptance was in vogue throughout state conventions and our national convention. Now, some state conventions are in throes of thwarting right-wing takeovers on an annual basis, while the national convention has been orchestrated in appointments and themes.

"Isn't it time to say enough is enough. Enough of political manipulation. Let Baptists once again love each other and accept each other. Enough of hollow rhetoric and labelling without cause. Let Baptists once again do business on the basis of integrity."

Another pastor, W. David Sapp of First Baptist Church of Chamblee, an Atlanta suburb, discussed the priesthood of the believer and commented that a vote for Resolution 5 at the 1988 annual meeting in San Antonio, Texas, on pastoral authority and the priesthood of the believer was a vote against Matthew 20:25, which deals with servant leadership.

"Pastoral leadership is good and scriptural and right, but all of us are priests," he said. "But when we understand that the pastor holds a special rank ... has a special line to God ... is an authority figure, then we have violated the fiber of our faith."

E. Leon Smith, pastor of First Baptist Church of Goldsboro, N.C., warned participants that "an attack on the priesthood of believers today will be followed with an attack on local church autonomy tomorrow. Power cannot ultimately be consolidated until every Baptist body marches lock-step to the power base."

He added: "When you start redefining the priesthood of believers, you start chiseling away at local church autonomy. When you insist that only one view of biblical inspiration and interpretation is acceptable, you dig the foundation from under the principle of local-church autonomy.

"When you use the appointive powers of the (SBC) president to solidify political strategies, you create a specter of power that causes the local Baptist church to pale in comparison.

"When you tell a local church that it cannot receive funding from the Home Mission Board because of the sexual identity of the minister, you hold the gospel up for derision before the world and tell the congregation it does not have the ability to discern God's will."

The current power brokers, he said, are ignoring local churches and see the churches as existing for the denomination rather than the reverse.

"Any group or movement that ignores the concerns of the churches, the associations and the state conventions will eventually self-destruct. The people (in the churches) are long-suffering but they have their limits ... limits that are being stretched," he said.

James M. Dunn, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs in Washington, told participants the long-held Baptist belief in separation of church and state is "crumbling," and detailed three "heresies" common today: revisionism, non-preferentialism and reconstructionism.

He alluded to attacks on the Baptist Joint Committee by SBC conservatives by noting, "At a time when the very existence of our joint venture with other Baptist brothers and sisters (the nine-member coalition) is at stake and the belief in church-state separation as an essential corollary of religious freedom is attacked, someone must speak out."

Another denominational executive, Russell Dilday, president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, noted the denomination is "divided ... no longer a mighty army," but told participants, "This is no time to give up on the SBC; there is a glimmer of hope."

He said, however, that to have hope, the SBC must have "authentic Southern Baptist leadership," and said those who would lead the denomination need seven characteristics: "They should have a profound and vital faith in Jesus Christ ... must take the Bible seriously as the authoritative word of God ... must know how to lead people to Jesus Christ ... must have courage and a willingness to stand by their convictions ... must be servants ... must have paid the price for adequate and legitimate preparation ... and must understand the importance of Baptist heritage."

Houston layman John Baugh told of the "costs" of disunity, and said they are being borne by "young men and women who are contemplating a divine call," and by "college students who are appalled by the untruths, meanness and slander still employed to gain even greater control of the convention" and by "pastors who will grieve and be crushed that they trustingly but naively followed the political party line."

In addition to the symposium, Baptists Committed leaders are organizing rallies across the country, to feature Vestal and other spokesmen, attempting to turn out messengers to the Las Vegas convention.

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Vestal promises
to share power

By Marv Knox

N-CO

Baptist Press
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NASHVILLE (SP)--If Southern Baptists elect Daniel Vestal as their president, his attitude will be winner-share-all rather than winner-take-all, he told a group of denominational "centrists."

Vestal is pastor of Dunwoody Baptist Church in suburban Atlanta and an announced candidate for the Southern Baptist Convention presidency. He will face SBC President Jerry Vines, pastor of First Baptist Church of Jacksonville, Fla., and eligible for another one-year term, when the SBC meets in Las Vegas, Nev., June 13-15.

Vestal spoke three times to a symposium sponsored by Baptists Committed to the SBC May 1-2 in Nashville.

When Vestal announced his candidacy in mid-April, he said he would welcome Baptists Committed's support but insisted he does not belong to that or any other group. He does call himself a "centrist," a label adopted by most Baptist Committed members.

During two of Vestal's presentations in Nashville, he fielded questions from about 150 symposium participants. He also spoke on the authority of Scripture and Southern Baptists' declining adherence to the Bible.

The first question put to him was about how he would conduct himself as president. "The pattern of the last 10 years has been basically a philosophy of winner-take-all," Vestal said. "My philosophy would be that the winner shares all."

"My appointments would be from a different perspective. I would include all Southern Baptists -- even the present leadership -- because I'm a centrist."

Vestal also pledged, if elected, to seek a limitation on presidential powers. The 10-year SBC theological/political controversy has swirled around those powers, since the president initiates a chain of events that lead to the appointment of trustees for 24 entities related to the convention.

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"The time has come to look at the powers of the president," Vestal said. "Something has got to happen structurally to prevent this (denominational strife) from happening again."

He would call for a study to formulate SBC bylaw changes "so we can de-politicize the presidential election every year," he said.

Vestal also promised to emphasize Southern Baptist missions and evangelism. "I am committed to the missions task of the church -- to claim the kingdom and lead people to submit to the lordship of Jesus Christ," he said. "If it is the Lord's will that I be elected, we as Southern Baptists need to redefine and refocus on the future."

"Bold Mission Thrust (the SBC's plan to present the gospel to the whole world by the year 2000) was a focus on how we were going to fulfill the Great Commission. I will call us back to some refocusing on how we will live out our lives in the last year of this millenium."

That would involve calling special meetings of laypeople, ministers, and missions and evangelism leaders to "refocus on the task God has given us."

Vestal told the symposium audience "centrist" is a label that always has fit him: "I have tried to stand in the middle. I have always been identified as a conservative, a biblical inerrantist."

His decision to be nominated for the presidency had spiritual and human dimensions, he said.

"In a spiritual sense, this has not been an easy decision. I have struggled," he said. "This is a decision I have not made by political calculation. I am not naive to what we're up against."

"From a human sense," Vestal said, "I saw our convention lose its sense of missions commitment."

He recalled how, as a young pastor in 1977, he wept with conviction as Southern Baptists launched Bold Mission Thrust.

"Southern Baptists walked up to a moment in history and walked away," he said of Bold Mission Thrust and the controversy that, he claimed, has distracted efforts to reach its goals.

"The first thing we lost was that focus on world evangelism," he said. "The second thing we lost was our trust, to the point that now we're absolutely paranoid."

"But what really turned the corner for me is we're losing our freedom. This is not a free denomination. Technically, we're still free; we can vote. But the process (of operating the convention) is controlled."

"I am enough of a Baptist that when I see us losing our freedom that I am willing to do what I can to protect that freedom."

During his speech, Vestal said Southern Baptists are being secularized. They have been "sentimentalized, superficialized, humanized, homogenized to a great degree because we do not take the Bible seriously," he noted.

"For 10 years, we've talked about the Bible, debated the Bible, but I fear we are not any more a people of the Bible than we were when we first started this theological, political wrangling. Indeed, we are less a people of the Bible than we were 10 years ago."

"We are not a biblical-thinking people. The Bible does not inform our values and priorities as much as our culture and egos. The Bible has become the object of our discussion and debate rather than the subject that confronts us with the transforming power of God."

Speaking of the nature of Scripture, Vestal said: "The Bible is the book that tells us the truth about God. The truth that is true; not exhaustive; ... truth without mixture of error. It is the truth that is always true to its intent and purpose."

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The "critical" study of Scripture -- which he defined as a serious attempt to look at the forms through which the Bible developed -- can be very valuable in understanding that truth, Vestal said:

"Those critical methodologies, in the hands of Bible-believing Christians, are tools to help us understand the word of God, not tools to undermine the Scripture. They helped me value the Bible more."

The Bible has two major purposes, he said: "to tell us the truth about God so in knowing God through Jesus Christ we are saved from our sins" and "how to know God through the Lord Jesus Christ and in that knowledge live in this world as God intends."

"Southern Baptists need to hear the word of God," Vestal said. "All of us -- each of us -- need to restore the authority of the Bible for daily living, that we might have our hearts shaped by Jesus Christ, and live like it."

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Jamaican church repair
set for May completion

N-FMB
By Eric Miller & Jim Burton

Baptist Press
5/3/89

RICHMOND, Va. (BP)--Jamaica's lush green countryside once again gleams with metal roofs on Baptist churches, thanks to more than 500 Baptist volunteers from 17 states and Canada.

About 180 of the 286 Baptist churches on the Caribbean island sustained damage totaling about \$2 million during Hurricane Gilbert Sept. 12, 1988.

Jamaica was the first overseas volunteer missions project for Canadian Baptists, said Heather Steeves, national volunteer coordinator for the Canadian Baptist Federation. Cameron Byler, disaster relief coordinator for the Southern Baptist Brotherhood Commission, helped initiate Canadian involvement, and the federation worked through the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board in sending volunteers.

By late April, volunteers had refurbished 110 churches, 12 pastors' houses, one all-purpose building, one home for underprivileged girls, three teachers' cottages, one school and one vestry, said John Baxley, on-site project coordinator and trustee of the Brotherhood Commission.

Repair of the churches began Jan. 2 and is scheduled for completion May 20, said Baxley, a retired fast-food chain franchisee from St. Augustine, Fla. Heavily damaged churches were repaired first, he said.

Materials used in the project include 12,000 sheets of galvanized roofing, 7,000 16-foot boards and four tons of nails -- carried on 10 tractor-trailer rigs and shipped from Miami to Jamaica. Bob Bishop, a Chiefland, Fla., builder, measured each damaged church to help order building materials.

The Foreign Mission Board spent \$200,000 in FMB disaster relief funds on Jamaican church reconstruction, said Boyd O'Neal of the board's volunteers-in-missions department. The board also sent 50 tons of beans, 25 tons of rice, five tons of dried milk, some cooking oil and baby food, all costing \$33,000.

In addition, Southern Baptists donated through the board about 43 tons of food, including flour, rice, beans, fruits, vegetables, meats, baby food, pasta, sugar, shortening, dried potatoes and canned milk.

Jamaican Baptists also have received food and money from the Baptist Missionary Society of London, Caribbean Baptist churches, the European Baptist Federation and Canadian Baptists, said Cawley Bolt, general secretary of the Jamaican Baptist Union.

Many damaged churches were in need of extensive renovation before the hurricane, Bolt noted. It might have been years before congregations made those repairs, he said, adding, "All things work together for the good of those who love the Lord."

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