



# BAPTIST PRESS

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89-130

Florida Baptists adopt  
abortion statement, strategy

By Greg Warner

N-10  
(Fla.)

ORLANDO, Fla. (BP)--"Your voice needs to be heard," Florida Gov. Bob Martinez told more than 2,200 cheering Florida Baptists, who promptly adopted a statement opposing abortion Sept. 8 and geared up for the approaching legislative battle that will determine the direction of Florida's abortion laws.

Martinez and several other abortion opponents spoke to a historic called session of the Florida Baptist State Convention Sept. 8-9 at Downtown Baptist Church in Orlando, which attracted the attention of both local and national media.

The convention's 1,708 messengers adopted the consensus statement on abortion, which included plans for a strategy of ministry to women with problem pregnancies and which called for "legislation that will achieve the dramatic saving and nurturing of human life."

The statement is targeted at state legislators, who will gather in Tallahassee Oct. 10-13 at Martinez's request to consider more restrictive abortion laws. After adopting the statement Friday night, 1,092 messengers and visitors spent Saturday morning in workshops learning how to influence those legislators.

The special session -- only the third in Florida Baptist history and the first dealing with a moral issue -- took on more of the character of a pro-life rally than a Baptist convention. Participants cheered speeches denouncing abortion and moaned when a handful of messengers voiced opposition.

The three-hour opening session, which opened with the national anthem, was punctuated by frequent calls to political activism.

"We must not let Satan silence us because we might be misunderstood," said convention President Bill Billingsley of Hollywood, whose call for the special convention was criticized as thrusting Florida Baptists into dangerous political waters. Billingsley said such "political ramifications" must not prevent Florida Baptists from saying "what is in our heart."

"We have an obligation to allow the word of God to be heard in a secular world," Billingsley, pastor of Sheridan Hills Baptist Church in Hollywood, told messengers as they began consideration of his recommendation, which affirms that "human life ... begins at conception" and calls for a tightening of Florida's abortion laws.

"We have taken a stand," Bobby Welch, pastor of First Baptist Church of Daytona Beach, told messengers after they adopted the recommendation. "Now let's take action for those who can't take a stand."

Welch and others urged Florida Baptists to write their state legislators and to join other anti-abortionists who are staging a demonstration in Tallahassee Oct. 9, on the eve of the special legislative session.

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About 50 anti-abortion demonstrators lined the steps of the church before and during the Sept. 8 session, some offering words of encouragement and appreciation to messengers entering the building.

Pro-choice supporters, who had threatened to demonstrate at the church, instead scheduled a rally at an Orlando airport as Martinez arrived.

Security was tight at the church during the 15-minute speech by Martinez, who has been followed in recent weeks by pro-choice demonstrators.

Martinez told Florida Baptists that, because of his concern for unborn babies, "I felt it was time for Florida to look at its laws dealing with abortion." Messengers then rose to their feet in applause.

Martinez said his proposed legislation represents "what we believe can be done" to tighten the state's abortion laws. The proposal, which will be debated by state lawmakers in October, would prohibit the use of state funds to perform or promote abortions and would restrict abortions of babies old enough to survive outside the womb.

"When that unborn baby has the ability to live outside its mother, that baby is one of us and its life should not be aborted," the governor said, again to applause.

"We hear a lot of background noise from those who say this is an issue of rights," said Martinez, a Roman Catholic. "But an unborn baby has rights, and those rights need to be protected."

Martinez blasted critics who point out stricter abortion laws will cost the state more money, since more babies being born will mean more health services will be needed. The state has "spent millions to save manatees," Martinez noted, "and you mean to tell me we are going to be concerned about some added cost of saving unborn babies?"

Martinez commended Florida Baptists for taking action on abortion. "I can assure you we will make a difference come Oct. 10 of this year," he said.

Although messengers were scheduled to vote on the anti-abortion recommendation before Martinez spoke, they ran short of time during debate and had to postpone the vote until after the governor left.

The statement, which acknowledges the reality and right of disagreement among Baptists on abortion, itself received some criticism from messengers.

Robert Perkins of DeLand told other messengers he is opposed to abortion but he added, "The decision to bear a child should be left to the woman." His comment was greeted by moans and boos from the audience.

Walter Delamarter of Lakeland, former executive director of the Florida Baptist Children's Homes, commended the recommendation but voiced his concern about child abuse. "We ought to be as concerned about killing after birth as killing before birth," he said.

"Abortion will not prevent child abuse," countered Richard Fleming of Orange Park.

"Freedom is at stake tonight in this auditorium," said Bob Casey, a family physician from Gainesville who opposed the recommendation. "Southern Baptists ought not to depend on legal structures and laws to do what we ought to do."

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While others waited at microphones for a turn to speak, messengers voted to close debate and vote on the recommendation. They were interrupted, however, by Sharon Jensen of Cocoa, who complained that no women had been allowed to speak either from the floor or on the program.

"I doubt seriously that if the issue were castration, that only women would be allowed to talk," she yelled as she walked toward the platform.

Billingsley allowed Jensen to speak from a floor microphone, where she criticized the recommendation as involving "the body of Christ ... in a political issue."

Having already defeated a motion for a ballot vote, messengers then approved the recommendation by standing, with only a handful standing in opposition. After the vote, messengers cheered and applauded.

In addition to opposing abortion, the recommendation creates a 15-member committee that will plan a strategy for Florida Baptists to implement more homes for unwed mothers, adoption services, foster-care services, crisis-pregnancy centers and education in Christian sexuality.

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Human life under assault,  
Land tells Florida Baptists By Jack E. Brymer & Barbara Denman

N- (CO)  
(Fla.)

Baptist Press  
9/12/89

ORLANDO, Fla. (BP)--Human life -- from conception to death and at all points in between -- is under assault, a Southern Baptist ethicist told messengers to a special session of the Florida Baptist State Convention Sept. 8 in Orlando.

Richard Land, executive director of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission, told about 2,200 messengers and visitors to sound a clarion call against all actions that assault human life.

Land was keynote speaker for the special session, which was designed to mobilize Florida Baptists to support the more restrictive abortion laws proposed for the state. The two-day meeting also featured addresses by Orlando evangelist David Ring and John Sullivan, executive director of the Florida Baptist Convention.

"Death has invaded the nursery (and) the old folks home," Land said.

"We must oppose the barbaric, lethal combination of technical expertise and spiritual ignorance, which would deny that there is a spirit in man that is not in the animal kingdom and would abort and experiment on the preborn, harvest fetal tissue, allow death into the nursery for our mentally and physically handicapped infants, and encourage euthanasia in our hospitals and retirement homes.

"Let us understand that abortion is a titanic battle in a far larger war over the sacredness of life. The tragic irony is that if we don't put this evil genie back in the bottle, many of the people who are aborting their children will themselves in their old age be euthanized by the very same criteria."

Land said he is against abortion on demand "because I am a Christian. That doesn't mean pro-choice persons are not Christian, but it does mean they are inconsistent."

Land, who last month helped leaders of the Florida Baptist State Convention develop the anti-abortion recommendation that messengers approved Sept. 8, said the Bible is clear in its teaching on prenatal life and cited several references.

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"Human life is not like any other life," he said. "The Bible tells us that God made man in his image and he breathed into us life. We are not just a part of the animal kingdom.

"We've reached the place now where there are endangered species of animals -- snail darters and various types of owls -- that have more legal protection in some states than unborn children have.

"We live in a society that has a twisted, perverted double standard, where we can have a baby aborted, yet there is no requirement that painkillers be administered. But if you go out and shoot your dog, you can be arrested for cruelty to animals."

Christians have a responsibility to sound the alarm against all actions that assault the sanctity of human life, from the womb to the grave, Land said. "If you're going to be pro-life, there are some obligations. It's not enough just to be against abortion."

Baptists should expand ministries to those with problem pregnancies, such as supporting women who have been abandoned by the men who impregnated them, adopting unwanted children and providing financial assistance to children who are born with significant physical and mental handicaps.

"Abortion is not about women's rights," Land said. "Abortion is the only instance in our culture where we allow one human being absolute right of life and death over another human being. That's not the way this Judeo-Christian country does business.

"If Christians will not stand on this issue, on what issue will we stand? If not now, when? If not here, where? And if not you, who?"

Land closed with an appeal for cooperation among Baptists with different opinions on abortion:

"I say to Southern Baptists who are not where I am or where you are: Join us where you can. Do what your conscience will allow. And pray for us.

"The eyes of our convention and nation are on Florida."

Ring, a victim of cerebral palsy, made a personal plea against abortion.

The youngest in a family of eight children, Ring said all the odds were against his mother when she was pregnant with him. She was 43 years old and already had seven children, three of whom were crippled. Yet abortion was not an option, he said.

"I thank God my mama didn't have her eyes on herself, otherwise I would never have been born," said Ring, who developed cerebral palsy after being deprived of oxygen during childbirth.

Christians told him he would never preach, never marry and never have children, the evangelist said. But he has been preaching 17 years, including 263 days in the past year, he said, and has married and fathered children.

He asked his wife, Karen, to come to the platform. She brought their two young daughters with her. A son was in the nursery and a fourth child "is on the way," he said, touching his wife's stomach.

"Abortion is not an option," Ring said kneeling beside his two daughters. "I'm so glad my mother did not abort me."

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While other speakers focused attention on the abortion issue, Sullivan challenged messengers to take a stand on morality, evangelism and missions.

"We're not here just to pass another resolution," Sullivan said. "You cannot 'resolve' the moral problems of the world."

Instead, the session should be a starting point for a greater commitment among Florida Baptists, said Sullivan. If a change in commitment is not the outcome of the meeting, "we will retreat," he warned. "We will be the people of God or the arch-hypocrites of Florida."

Using the story of the rich man and the beggar Lazarus in the 16th chapter of the Gospel of Luke, Sullivan noted the rich man in the text had a "blind casualness toward life" that made him callous to the needs of Lazarus and others.

By ignoring the needs around him, the rich man was guilty of having "full pockets and an empty heart," Sullivan said.

"Are we guilty of having full pockets and empty hearts in the state of Florida?" he asked. More money alone won't do the job of reaching the state for Christ if commitment is lacking, he said.

"I pray God will give us a people ... with empty pockets and full hearts."

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Baptist woman still troubled  
a decade after her abortion

By Ken Camp

F-Texas

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DALLAS (BP)--Ten years ago, an 18-year-old unmarried pregnant girl tried to escape her problems by having an abortion.

After a decade of denial and depression, Brenda Wilson of Pond Springs Baptist Church in Austin, Texas, still is learning to live with that decision and is seeking to spare others the problems it created in her life.

"At the time I had my abortion, I had just graduated from high school," Wilson said. "My fiancée and I had decided to wait one year before we got married, so I was living with my parents and working when I found out I was pregnant. I wanted an abortion to hide the truth from them."

Having been reared in a nominally Roman Catholic home, Wilson said, she vaguely was aware of the moral dimensions of that decision, but she acted in desperation.

"I guess I knew it was wrong, but I was 18 and everybody in the newspaper and on television was saying I had a right to choose not to bear a child," she recalled. "I didn't listen to my conscience. I just wanted the problem to go away."

Instead, problems grew and festered. After five years of marriage, she and her husband's relationship deteriorated to an all-time low. It was at this point, though, that she turned to Christ.

"I had a very powerful conversion experience. I was suicidal at the time -- sitting in a chair, crying, unwilling to get up. I was suffering from depression, and I didn't know why. I didn't connect it with the abortion at that time."

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After accepting Christ as her savior, she joined Pond Springs Baptist Church, where she had been attending worship services and Bible studies.

"At the time, I was so exhilarated," she said. "I was so high from that experience I thought all my problems were over."

However, even after her own new birth and the birth of two healthy children, she still found herself plagued by nightmares, haunted by guilt and crippled in her relationships.

"My parenting skills were adversely affected," she said. "I had a hard time after the birth of my first child. I was scared to love her. In fact, I had a hard time with any intimate relationships.

"And I kept having dreams -- nightmares about losing my children. I had unnatural fears of them getting killed, of running out into the street and getting run over."

She began meeting in private counseling with her pastor and with an interdenominational Christian support group for women suffering from post-abortion grief and depression.

"I knew I had been forgiven for the abortion, but I still felt an overwhelming anger that was unresolved," she reported. "I said, 'Lord, what do you want me to do? Am I supposed to join Operation Rescue or what?' But I knew that wasn't for me."

Through counseling and sharing with others in her support group, Wilson began to deal with her feelings of guilt and with other underlying problems -- including the fact her own biological mother had chosen to offer her for adoption rather than abort.

"Finally, I realized that God wanted me to accept what I'd done and to forgive myself. That was the turning point," she said. "After that, the healing started.

"I don't feel good about the abortion. I'll always have to live with that. But I feel good about me. The experience has drawn me close to the Lord, because I know just how much he loves me. He has forgiven me for a lot -- even for killing my own child."

Today, she is committed to counseling other women with similar experiences and to helping young women avoid the heartache she has known. She has shared her story with several individuals and hopes to speak to the youth in her church soon.

"I want to tell others that it's easier to live with giving a life away to someone else than choosing death for an unborn child," she explained. "I have a birth mother who gave me away when she was 18. I know she did it because she loved me, and she can feel good about what she did. I never can.

"I just want to share my story -- to let other people know that my abortion touched every area of my life in an adverse way. I lived for 10 years in denial. And that is a dangerous place to live."

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Ex Baylor University student  
files discrimination lawsuit

By Ken Camp

N-Texas

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DALLAS (BP)--A former student at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, has filed suit against the Texas Baptist school, alleging that university officials forced her to leave because she was pregnant and unmarried.

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Dawn L. Bonner and the Dallas Civil Liberties Union filed suit Sept. 7 charging Baylor officials had violated her civil and constitutional rights.

In her suit, Bonner claims Baylor has an unwritten policy that requires pregnant, unmarried women to leave school. She alleges the policy is discriminatory because an unmarried man is not required to leave the university if he fathers a child.

The suit requests a permanent injunction that would bar Baylor from enforcing the unwritten policy regarding pregnant, unmarried students.

Bonner left Baylor University in October 1987. She gave birth to a son in February 1988.

William D. Hillis, senior vice president for academic affairs at Baylor University, confirmed that the university has no written policy regarding pregnant, unmarried students.

However, he said the long-standing, unwritten policy applies to both male and female students, adding that if the university knew a male student had fathered a child out of wedlock, he would be required to leave school.

Hillis said the matter had been referred to legal counsel, and he could make no further comment.