
ASSOCIATED BAPTIST PRESS

March 13, 2008

(8-28)

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Is Religious Right dead or part of new center?

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Reports the Religious Right's demise have been greatly exaggerated, according to Tony Perkins and Harry Jackson. But Jim Wallis, Samuel Rodriguez, David Gushee and other leaders and authors argue that the Religious Right, while not dead, is certainly suffering from a failure to thrive.

Both sides may be right.

Perkins and Jackson, both prominent Religious Right leaders, hosted a March 12 Washington discussion on their new book, *Personal Faith, Public Policy*. In the text, they argue that the movement known as the Religious Right is not dead or dying but is actually expanding -- despite recent media stories noting that a new generation of evangelicals is increasingly weary of the culture-war rhetoric that is the movement's hallmark.

"I feel amazingly well; I don't feel like I'm cracking up or I'm dying," Perkins, president of the Family Research Council, told reporters. "These headlines, like the paper that they're written on, are recycled."

Perkins and Jackson -- a Washington-area pastor and key African-American supporter of President Bush in his successful 2000 and 2004 election campaigns -- note in the book that the "liberal media" has at least twice in the past pronounced the Religious Right dead. The first was in 1989 after the death of the Moral Majority. The second was in the late 1990s after Congress failed in its impeachment efforts and the Christian Coalition's influence began to wane.

Jackson said the fact that many younger evangelical leaders seem as concerned with global poverty and the environment as with abortion rights or sexuality shows that the Religious Right is simply evolving. "Our movement is not dead; it's maturing," he claimed.

But Wallis and other Christian leaders say that, inasmuch as a broad evangelical political movement exists and is maturing, it is maturing beyond the causes and structures of the Religious Right. "I am not one of those who say the Religious Right is dead or gone," Wallis, head of the Sojourners/Call to Renewal anti-poverty movement, said during the discussion. "What I have said is what has felt like a monologue is over, and a dialogue has begun."

Wallis said the mainstream media is finally beginning to realize that not all self-described evangelicals are socially or economically conservative, white or obsessed with legalized abortion, gay rights and government endorsements of Christianity. "I am pro-life as well. The question is, how does a consistent life-ethic apply; how deep and wide does it go?" he said. "To me, it includes the 33,000 children who will die today as a consequence of poverty and disease."

Jackson and Perkins, in their book and in the discussion, acknowledged that the Religious Right has, in some cases, been too closely identified with the Republican Party -- and that both may have suffered a loss of confidence from evangelicals, as evidenced by the number who voted for Democrats in the 2006 mid-term congressional elections. "I think we saw in 2006 there was some hesitancy to challenge the Republicans in their long train of scandals that derailed their majority," Perkins said. "I know that I was criticized for speaking out against some of the Republicans, for instance, [disgraced Florida congressman] Mark Foley, because there was concern that if we spoke out against them we would lose our majority."

Some questioners noted that the Republican Party, in turn, was poised to nominate a presidential candidate -- Arizona Sen. John McCain -- who has had a contentious relationship with the Religious Right.

But Perkins said conservative Christians are still exerting influence in the party. "I think the fact that we have a McCain candidacy shows that evangelicals are strong and it's not a Rudy Giuliani candidacy," he claimed, noting the collapse of the moderate former New York mayor's GOP campaign. "Clearly, the Big Apple values were seen as being totally inappropriate to the core of the Republican Party."

The fact that Jackson and Perkins have written their book is itself vindication of the idea that evangelical politics is changing, said David Gushee, a Mercer University professor (and Associated Baptist Press columnist) who has written a new book hailing the emergence of what he calls the “evangelical center.” At a separate March 11 panel discussion on Gushee’s book, *The Future of Faith in American Politics*, Gushee said Jackson and Perkins are offering a “reformist vision” of the conservative evangelical political movement that seems to have a lot in common with what leaders like Wallis and others are saying. “It looks like the evangelical center is indeed arriving and that many are converging toward that center,” Gushee said.

Rich Cizik, chief public-policy officer for the National Association of Evangelicals, said the emergence of new evangelical politics will change the “us-versus-them” tone with which many conservative Christians have addressed those who disagree. “It’s moving, you see, from a zero-sum-game politics where someone else has to lose for us to win, to a common-good vision of politics,” he said.

Cizik should know. He has drawn repeated fire from the Religious Right’s old-guard leaders for his outspokenness and willingness not to toe the traditional conservative line on issues such as global warming and torture. “In transactional politics you exchange goods, services, votes or whatever in return. And the evangelicals were in effect saying to the leaders of the Religious Right, ‘We’ll give you our support’” in voting for a party that seemed to embrace the values they found important, Cizik said. But more moderate and liberal Christians, as well as non-Christians, fought back. But, he continued, “Transformational politics is very, very different.”

The Religious Right might not be changing its tone altogether, though. For example, Perkins’ book assails those who support gay rights or strong church state-separation as “anti-Christian” and contends that media and political elites continue to harbor anti-Christian biases.

Nonetheless, the fact that Perkins would even invite Wallis to appear on the same panel with him may itself be the sign of new cooperation with groups his movement has often vilified. “We do have some common ground with Jim Wallis and others that approach some of the same issues, but we approach them different,” Perkins admitted at the March 12 event. “This is an example of a new dialogue,” Wallis said.

Will Baptists be counted among those in the ‘evangelical center’?

(ABP) -- If an “evangelical center” emerges from the current shake-up in American politics, will moderate Baptists be part of it? It depends on how comfortable moderate Baptists are with being considered “evangelicals” in the first place. Moderate and progressive Baptists certainly share many beliefs and public-policy goals with the non-fundamentalist evangelicals making their presence felt on the public scene for the first time in three decades.

But Baptists aren’t technically evangelicals at all, most historians say. They come from a different theological and denominational lineage. However, some theologians counter, if you look simply at what Baptists believe and how they practice their faith, they look very much like evangelicals.

That debate might make for interesting table conversation when moderate or progressive Baptists get together with kin from other denominational traditions. But then there’s that whole Religious Right thing. Its inflexible political agenda and conservative theology have turned off centrist Baptists and saddled evangelical centrists with a negative public image.

“Fundamentalists have hijacked the term ‘evangelical,’” lamented Baptist theologian Roger Olson, a Northern evangelical who moved to the Southern Baptist-dominated South a few years ago to teach. A professor of theology at Baylor University’s George W. Truett Theological Seminary, Olson is more familiar with traditional evangelicalism than are the moderate Baptists with whom he associates in Waco, Texas.

Olson and others who embrace the “evangelical” label are trying hard to rehabilitate the definition to include non-fundamentalists. His latest book, *How to Be Evangelical Without Being Conservative*, is one attempt.

“If you define evangelicalism as core doctrinal beliefs, there’s no reason why Baptists would not be evangelicals,” agreed ethicist David Gushee, a Southern Baptist moderate who moves easily in the broader evangelical world. Baptists and evangelicals share beliefs in “the inspired Word of God, the importance of personal experience, living out their faith in every area of life, and the obligation to share their faith,” he said. “Most moderate, former-SBC Christians are evangelical Christians, and most are evangelical centrists,” added Gushee, a professor of ethics at Mercer University and a columnist for Associated Baptist Press. His recent book, *The Future of Faith in American Politics*, tracks the resurgence of the evangelical center as a significant political force.

Unlike Gushee, Olson prefers a definition of evangelicals based not on common doctrine but common Christian practices, which he describes as a “Jesus-centered piety.” Seen in that light, Olson said, moderates in the South “are not as different as they think” from Northern evangelicals, who are far outnumbered in the North by Catholics, mainline Christians and those of other faiths.

Most historians date the evangelical movement to the early-and-mid-20th- century United States, when evangelicals offered an alternative to both mainline Protestant liberalism and reactionary fundamentalism. Baptists in America, who generally were not part of that struggle, grew out of European Anabaptist and British Baptist roots in the 16th century.

But Gushee contends the evangelical movement also has roots in an earlier era. “If you trace it back to the Protestant renewal movements all the way back to Luther, then I think Baptists are very much evangelicals,” he said. “I have worked alongside evangelical Methodists, evangelical Pentecostals,” Gushee said. “They are brothers and sisters. There are distinctives about being Baptist, but there is also commonality with other Bible-believing Christians.”

But Gushee and Olson concede many moderate Baptists don’t want to be linked to evangelicals today because of the group’s perceived negative image. In recent decades, the popular definition of “evangelical” has become more akin to “social conservative” -- particularly on the hot-button issues of abortion and gay rights.

Historian Bill Leonard, an expert on Baptist origins, said Baptists’ discomfort with evangelicalism predates the Religious Right. “Moderate Baptists certainly have affinity with classic evangelicalism, but they have also been concerned about several aspects of the movement,” said Leonard, dean of the Wake Forest University Divinity School in North Carolina. He also cited the movement’s penchant for a rationalistic approach to theology and its mostly regional appeal: “Some said evangelicalism was a ‘Northern phenomenon.’”

Likewise, moderates’ theological debates with Southern Baptist conservatives “often soured moderate Baptists toward identifying with any movement that seemed too doctrinaire,” Leonard said in an e-mail interview. “On the other hand, there are indeed many moderate Baptists who are unashamedly evangelical in their approach to doctrine, faith and ethics, insisting that evangelicalism is the overarching movement that will unite Baptists around categories distinct from the old moderate-conservative debates that were present in the Southern Baptist Convention.” The discomfort was also present on the other side of the fence, he said. “Many traditional evangelicals, especially north of Baltimore, have been hesitant to include Baptists in the South in the evangelical camp, in part because [the Southern Baptists] seemed less interested in classical theology and more concerned about popular, pietistic religion, and in part because [the Northern evangelicals] did not fully understand the ethos of Southern Protestantism and its culture.”

On that point, Olson agreed. “Minnesota and Texas are totally different,” he said. Even when they share many opinions and beliefs, evangelicals North and South “just don’t understand each other.” “The takeover of the SBC is so unique, people in the North just shake their heads,” he said. “Until I got here I couldn’t even comprehend that.” “The great tragedy,” Gushee added about the SBC, “is a great denomination came under control of a party that required leadership to be aligned with the evangelical right.”

Gushee recently left a teaching position at Union University, a conservative Baptist school in Tennessee closely tied to the SBC, and found a more tolerant academic climate at Mercer University in Georgia. He said the welcome he has received is “the same spirit that welcomed me” when he left Catholicism as a teenager and ventured into a Baptist church. He said he is hopeful that one day “that natural diversity is allowed to surface again” among Southern Baptists. He said he sees some “stirrings” indicating that is possible, but he added, “I’m just glad my future doesn’t depend on it.”

Bangladesh church leader wins BWA human rights award

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Dennis Dilip Datta has been named the 2008 recipient of the Baptist World Alliance Denton and Janice Lotz Human Rights Award. Datta, a Baptist leader from the Muslim-majority country of Bangladesh, won the award for his advocacy for Bangladesh independence, the restoration of democracy there, and the establishment of religious freedom in his country, a press release from BWA said.

As founding general secretary and current president of the National Christian Fellowship of Bangladesh, which takes special interest in human rights causes, Datta is the spokesman for churches to the government of Bangladesh and has worked against laws to control church ministries. He has written several books on human rights and religious freedom, including *Strength to Endure* and *Government Decision: Churches Reaction*.

The former president and general secretary of the Bangladesh Baptist Fellowship served on the BWA’s General Council and was a member of the Commission on Freedom and Justice and the Communications Committee. Datta will receive the annual human rights award, named after former BWA General Secretary Denton Lotz and his wife Janice, during the General Council meeting this July in Prague.

The 2007 recipients were Joao and Nora Matwawana from Angola, who played a pivotal role in peace efforts in Burundi, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Angola.

Musings on a new Southern Baptist declaration on climate change

By David Gushee

The question before all Christians at all times is whether we will follow Jesus by seeking wholeheartedly to do God's will.

Too often in American Christian/evangelical/Baptist life we have allowed ourselves to displace our loyalty to Jesus Christ and replace unflinching obedience to his will with other loyalties and priorities. We have been loyal to our political party, our denomination or intra-denominational party, our ideology, our self-interest, our nation, our "side." Too often the wounds we have suffered in our wretched internecine conflicts have damaged our ability to see a Christian brother or sister across the party/ideology/nation/denomination barricade. Loyalty to our side comes first; anger over past wounds still prevails. And so we lose the ability to love our (alienated Christian) neighbor as ourselves.

This week a group of significant Southern Baptist leaders released a theological statement on the environment. Their statement (which I had no involvement with) says the following, in my distillation:

- Faithful Christians are obligated to respond to the pressing moral demands and duties of the age in which they live.
- Environmental and climate change issues are among those pressing moral challenges today.
- The current stance of the Southern Baptist Convention on such issues has been too timid and cautious and may hurt the denomination's moral witness.

- Christians must care for creation as an aspect of obedience to God's will. When we fail to do so, we violate God's will and offer a poor witness to the world.

- While there is not unanimity in the scientific community about the cause or severity of climate change, there is broad- and intense-enough scientific concern about this issue that prudence and moral responsibility require that we address the problem now.

- Christians must care about environmental and climate issues because of our love for God, God's Word, and our neighbors.

- It is now time for human beings at all levels of human community to act, beginning with voluntary efforts and extending to serious consideration of government policy options.

To all of these propositions I can only say yes.

More could have been said. The statement could have embraced mainstream climate science more unequivocally. It could have named the projected problems caused by climate change more concretely. It could have been more specific in naming policy measures that are worth supporting and offering such support. I prefer the Evangelical Climate Initiative of 2006 for all of these reasons.

But the statement also could not exist. The presidents of the Southern Baptist Convention, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Union University, Palm Beach Atlantic University, California Baptist University, Southwest Baptist University, and the Kentucky Baptist Convention (among others) could have chosen to hide behind denominational loyalty and personal self-interest and decided not to say a word about this controversial issue. They could have decided that a declaration in which they confess a shortcoming in the current denominational stance would be too controversial. They would not be answering angry emails today if they had chosen to remain silent. Doing nothing is always so much safer.

Instead, they decided to practice the teachings of Jesus. Christians do things like this -- studying Scripture, praying in terms of Scripture, testing behavior by Scripture, confessing wrongdoing in light of Scripture -- then venture ahead in an effort to follow Christ more truly.

For those who are attacking this statement out of loyalty to a summertime SBC resolution or loyalty to "the convention," I urge you to respect the conscientious effort of your brothers and sisters in Christ to follow Jesus and obey Scripture, and I remind you that Jesus is the only Lord before whom we must bow.

For those who are attacking this statement as too little and too late, I urge you to consider this proposal: Followers of Jesus should respond to brothers and sisters who are venturing onto the right path not by slapping them around but by welcoming them on the journey and offering a helping hand.
