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June 19, 2003

Posted 6/19/03

Southern Baptist president says homosexuals can change

By Greg Warner

Associated Baptist Press

PHOENIX, Ariz.-Homosexuals are able to change and leave the gay lifestyle, Jack Graham told reporters soon after his re-election as Southern Baptist Convention president.

Graham, pastor of Prestonwood Baptist Church in suburban Dallas, threw his support behind a new SBC emphasis to convince homosexuals to become heterosexual.

"We do not believe a person is captured by a lifestyle that does not please God," Graham said during a press conference at the SBC annual meeting in Phoenix.

This year's convention is emphasizing a "biblical view" of the family, which Graham and others said does not include homosexuality. A group of protesters who gathered outside the Phoenix Civic Plaza disagreed and urged Southern Baptists to change their anti-gay stance.

Homosexuality is "obviously a huge cultural issue," Graham acknowledged. "Perhaps some would assume that Southern Baptists are angry or full of hatred toward this group of people. We have those, of course, who have

expressed their views and opinions here on the streets and with pamphlets and so on," he said, referring to the protesters.

Southern Baptists "oppose the homosexual lifestyle" but want "lovingly" to persuade gays to change, Graham said. "We want every person to know that Jesus loves them and that the message of the gospel is for every person."

Graham and other speakers held up a traditional view of the family as the answer to multiple social problems.

"I believe (the breakdown of) the family is the greatest social issue of our time," Graham said. Broken families are a problem not only outside the church but inside as well, he added.

He noted the elevated importance of the family in the recently revised Baptist Faith & Message. While the doctrinal statement takes no position on women working outside the home, he said, "We're clear on the responsibilities of both mom and dad to be good parents and to prioritize their children."

On other issues, Graham said Southern Baptists will make every effort to remain a part of the Baptist World Alliance, even though the convention voted earlier in the day to reduce SBC funding of the international umbrella group from \$425,000 to \$300,000.

The SBC has been the largest participant and largest funder among the 200-plus BWA member bodies. But Graham said Southern Baptists and the BWA are "struggling" in their relationship. "There are issues at stake that are very serious issues."

SBC leaders oppose the BWA's plans to grant membership to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, which is composed mainly of former Southern Baptists.

“We were concerned the process was becoming flawed and Southern Baptists were not being heard or properly understood (regarding) our viewpoints on the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and other issues I'm not prepared to talk about today,” Graham said.

“It's our desire ... to work these difficulties out and (be) able to join hands with Baptists across the world,” he said. “Southern Baptists will do everything we can, with integrity to our own denomination and in stewardship of our own funds, to make this work.

“I think we'll know more after this year as to where we stand,” he added.

“We will be working with Baptists around the world in some way,” he said, suggesting the SBC might create or join another international Baptist group. “It's not our desire to be isolated from other Baptists. It's not our desire to be fragmented in any way.”

Graham also said he is not concerned about the rise of five-point Calvinist doctrine among SBC seminary professors and students. “I believe we have a healthy balance among various views,” he said. “I am confident that our Baptist Faith & Message encompasses both streams on that issue.”

But he added he would not want to see Southern Baptists embrace “an elitist doctrine” or to minimize the importance of evangelism, which are common criticisms of five-point Calvinism. Fully developed Calvinism, as embraced by the president and several faculty members at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, teaches that God has predestined only some people for salvation, thereby also condemning all others to hell from the start.

Graham also said he is not worried about the future of missions in the SBC despite a funding shortfall at the International Mission Board. He said the shortfall was due to the economic downturn and added the mission agency had suffered only “a small fallout” from its decision to require missionaries

to sign the Baptist Faith & Message 2000.

“I have a great deal of confidence in our International Mission Board,” he said.