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By Greg Warner

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JACKSON, Tenn. (ABP)-If American troops kill Osama bin Laden, a Southern Baptist ethicist insists it should be "in the name of justice," not "in the name of the Lord" as televangelist Jerry Falwell suggests.

And a prominent Texas Baptist said using God's name as motivation for killing "defames Christianity."

In a televised debate on CNN, Falwell said President Bush should "blow them (the terrorists) all away in the name of the Lord."

Capturing and, if necessary, killing terrorists "is a morally legitimate exercise of military force," said David Gushee, professor of moral philosophy at Union University in Jackson, Tenn. "However, it must be recognized that in the terms of Christian moral thought, even justified wars are not to be treated as if they are being fought 'in the name of the Lord.'

Jerry
Falwell

“If we do capture Osama bin Laden, for example, or even if we kill him, it will not be ‘in the name of the Lord,’” Gushee said. “It will be in the name of justice, and in the defense of the United States. There is a difference, and one that is easily overlooked when passions run high in times of war.”

Falwell's comment came on “CNN Late Edition With Wolf Blitzer” in a debate with Baptist minister Jesse Jackson, who called the Iraq war “a misadventure” that isolated the United States politically and cost the country lives, money and “our character.”

Falwell, pastor of Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Va., responded: “I'd rather be killing them over there than fighting them over here, Jesse. And I think you would. ...”

“Let's stop the killing and choose peace,” Jackson responded. “Let's choose negotiation over confrontation.”

“Well, I'm for that too,” Falwell added. “But you've got to kill the terrorists before the killing stops. And I'm for the president to chase them all over the world. If it takes 10 years, blow them all away in the name of the Lord.”

David Currie, executive director of Texas Baptists Committed, said he was “dumbfounded” by Falwell's comments.

“I could not believe what I was hearing from a Christian minister,” said Currie, who holds a doctorate in Christian ethics from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Currie agreed with Gushee that the United States should hunt down terrorists, killing them if necessary to prevent further acts of terrorism.

“But Jerry Falwell is absolutely wrong in his theology and his politics to claim such actions should be done 'in the name of Lord,' that is, Jesus Christ,” he said. “Jerry Falwell's remarks defame Christianity, my faith and the faith of most Americans. ...

“The message of Christianity is not war, hatred or murder. It is love, unconditional love. That is the nature of God. The war on terror is not a war between Christians and Muslims. It is a war between those who want peace in the world and those who want to destroy peace. To imply God has a side, other than peace, is poor theology.

“It defames Christianity to imply God and the United States of America have some kind of special relationship. It defames the sacrificial death of Christ on the cross for every person, regardless of race, nationality, sex or religion. It defames Christianity to use the name of God as a motivation to kill others. It defames Christianity to imply Christians—who are only saved because they admit their sinfulness and need of a savior—are morally superior to persons of other faiths.”

Falwell and other conservative Christians have drawn criticism for linking the war on terrorism with a crusade against Islamic fundamentalism. Falwell earlier called Muhammad, Islam's founder, a terrorist, then later apologized.

“Jerry Falwell apparently believes the United States is waging holy war in Iraq,” said Stan Haste, executive director of the Alliance of Baptists.

“Such comments are fodder for the terrorists, bulletin board material for Osama bin Laden in recruiting his own holy warriors. What spews out of Jerry Falwell's mouth is increasingly toxic. He would do well to re-read Jesus' beatitudes and reorder both his rhetoric and priorities accordingly.”

Falwell's comments place Americans—including American missionaries serving around the world—at risk, Currie commented.

“His remarks implying that this is a war between Christians and Muslims invite persons of other faiths to look at all Christians with suspicion,” he said.

“To say that terrorists should be 'killed in the name of the Lord,' it to imply Americans are all of the same faith and to encourage radical persons of other faiths to attack America because we are Christians who believe in killing others of different faiths.”

Gushee agreed Christians should speak carefully about the war. “We must be careful not to label every international adversary as a terrorist,” he said.

“We must draw appropriate distinctions between the struggle against the international Islamist terrorist network and ongoing problems in Iraq. And our nation (must) make every effort to pursue peacemaking initiatives that can ease tensions between our own nation and the countries and peoples of the Arab world.”

Glen Stassen, professor of Christian ethics at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, Calif., went further. Stassen, co-author with Gushee of “Kingdom Ethics,” advocated “just peacemaking” as an alternative to war.

“Falwell's strategy was adopted by Russia against the Muslim terrorists in Chechnya, and it only increases the anger and the recruits to terrorism and the killing, as in North Ossetia,” he said, referring to the recent massacre at a Russian school.

“Turkey instead used just peacemaking practices with its Muslim terrorists among the Kurds, and the Kurdish terrorism is completely ended,” Stassen said. “They are not killing 'here' or 'there.'”

With additional reporting by Managing Editor Ken Camp

in the BGCT, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and around the world.