

# Disney boycott thrust SBC leaders into national spotlight\_61404

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**By Greg Warner**

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ORLANDO (ABP)—Southern Baptists' much-publicized boycott of the Walt Disney Co. had little effect on the media conglomerate, but it established the Southern Baptist Convention as the dominant denominational voice for conservative values, says the author of a forthcoming book.

In "The Gospel According to Disney," Mark Pinsky, religion writer for the Orlando Sentinel, offers an assessment of the Southern Baptist boycott, which targeted the entertainment giant for gay-friendly policies and "anti-Christian" messages in its movies.

Pinsky said the boycott of Disney products did not have the intended effect of curtailing sales or changing the company's practices, but it did bolster the reputation of Southern Baptists as cultural crusaders.

"Despite fears that the boycott would make them look like backwoods, knuckle-scraping yokels—as some feared when the boycott was first

proposed-Southern Baptist leaders found that this publicity helped them,” Pinsky wrote.

“In the domestic religious marketplace, at least, their controversial stands established and burnished their own brand as the conservative, family values denomination.”

The book, subtitled “Faith, Trust and Pixie Dust,” is a sequel to Pinsky's 2001 “The Gospel According to the Simpsons.”

The new book, due out in August, offers a broad, chronological analysis of the religious and social messages in Disney's feature films from 1937 to 2003. Separate chapters are devoted to Disney's theme parks and the “cultural clash” presented by the Baptist boycott.

June marks the seven-year anniversary of the Southern Baptist Convention boycott. After challenging Disney to change its ways in a 1996 resolution, the SBC joined several smaller Christian groups to boycott Disney in 1997, complaining that Disney-through its feature films and a myriad of subsidiaries-had abandoned the family-friendly image cultivated by founder Walt Disney.

“In the months and years following the boycott vote and ensuing controversy, essentially nothing happened,” wrote Pinsky, who is Jewish.

“The denomination, as some within it feared-and warned-appeared to be an economic paper tiger.”

Disney's financial fortunes “did decline dramatically” during the late 1990s and early 2000s, Pinsky noted, and Southern Baptists justifiably took some credit.

But no research validated their claim, he added. Financial analysts instead blamed recession, terrorism, sluggish retail sales and the low ratings of

Disney-owned ABC-TV.

Meanwhile, only 30 percent of Southern Baptists complied with the boycott, according to a poll taken a year after it began. The New York Times last year called the boycott an “utter flop” and noted no media company would fear the wrath of Southern Baptists, Pinsky said.

However, publicity for the boycott brought “considerable exposure” to Richard Land, president of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, landing him on the news media's “Golden Rolodex” and helping establish his daily syndicated radio show on 600 stations, Pinsky wrote.

Likewise, the media attention elevated the stature of Al Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and Land's “telegenic rival in the denomination.”

However, Dwayne Hastings, an ERLC vice president and spokesperson, said Land and Mohler were not products of the boycott.

“They were rising stars anyway,” he said. “The times demanded that they be there and that their voices be heard.”

Land and Mohler “were somewhat prophetic in their own right” by taking on the Disney juggernaut publicly, Hastings said. But there was a downside—they and other Christian leaders were “typecast” by their opposition, he said.

About Pinsky, who has written extensively about the boycott for the Orlando Sentinel and other publications, Hastings said: “The Disney boycott helped him too. It put his name out there. All three of them benefited from it somewhat.”

Hastings disputed the conclusion of Pinsky and others that the boycott was ineffectual. “It had to have an impact,” he said.

“I would not take credit for a down-tick in their stock,” he noted, adding, “It's very, very difficult to extract out and say 'we did this' or 'we did that.'” But there were too many boycotters not to have some effect, he said.

“Too many people in my circle made decisions (to avoid Disney products) that it had to have an impact, because my family isn't that unique,” Hastings reasoned.

Beyond the economic effect, he continued, the boycott “shined a spotlight” on Disney that CEO Michael Eisner did not welcome, highlighting the company's moral inconsistencies. The boycott “definitely sensitized a lot of Americans to what Disney was,” Hastings concluded.

Before and after the boycott, Baptist critics complained Disney allowed large-scale “Gay Days” promotions in its theme parks and offered health benefits for partners of gay employees, who by one insider estimate number 40 percent of Disney's workforce of 100,000.

Land and other critics say Disney was singled out from among even more offensive entertainment companies because it cultivates a clean-cut image, while at the same time pandering to non-Christian and anti-family influences.

But, Pinsky argued in his book, Disney has always been more a reflection of America's moral direction than a shaper of it, gradually changing over the years as the predominant culture changed.

Under the leadership of Walt Disney, who scrupulously avoided offending his customers, the early Disney movies touted a vague Judeo-Christian moral consensus and good-over-evil theme, Pinsky said—“a nondenominational, nonsectarian faith, with an undergirding of unconquerable optimism.”

In the Michael Eisner years (after 1984), as America became more

religiously diverse, Disney movies became multicultural, adding Eastern, Islamic, Native American and feminist viewpoints.

More importantly, Pinsky said, Disney's bottom line was always about making money, not advancing religion.

“As the country's attitudes toward religion, values and culture shifted, Disney's animated features-its historic corporate center of gravity-have shifted to accommodate them,” he concluded. “It's just business.”

While boycotters argued Disney's legacy of producing “uplifting, family-friendly fare” obligated the company to ignore customer wishes and market forces, Pinsky said, “This is a sentimental notion-naïve at best and disingenuous at worst.

“If people's tastes in entertainment are becoming more depraved ... whose responsibility is that?” he wrote. “Singling out Disney for blame is like blaming one brand of thermometer for causing a raging fever.

“Although they are still loath to admit it, the conservative Christian critics who took up their cudgels against Disney were really complaining about what made America what it is today-global capitalism and the market economy.”

In one sense, Pinsky said, the showdown between the SBC and Disney reflects the increasing polarization within American society.

“The collision of these two titans was a dispute deeply rooted in the disconnect of politics, culture and geography,” he said. Southern Baptists are generally “theologically fundamentalist, politically conservative and increasingly amenable to closer involvement between church and state,” while Disney's corporate culture is “urban, West Coast, secular and, at least on lifestyle issues, liberal.”

Hastings of the ERLC conceded the Disney-Baptist conflict mirrors cultural shifts, and Disney is a reflection of a changing America.

“There's more than a fair measure of truth in that,” he said. “But (Disney executives) haven't been willing to go very far beyond the culture,” he added. To justify its family-friendly image, he said, Disney should be more willing to challenge cultural assumptions and stereotypes.

For instance, Disney films “have done a lot of children a gross disservice” by stereotyping heroes as “attractive white men,” he said. And Disney is hypocritical to champion equality while selling merchandise produced by underage, underpaid Third World workers, he said.

After seven years, Hastings said, he doesn't see an imminent end to the Baptist boycott. “When it gets beyond a certain point, you'd look for a little movement on both sides to call an end. But we haven't seen that.”

He said Southern Baptist attention hasn't waned—the ERLC still gets “one or two calls a week” for information about the boycott. But, he conceded, “We have no idea how many families are observing it.

“Being Southern Baptists, it's up to individual families to do what they want to do with it.”

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