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By Ferrell Foster

Texas Baptist Communications

DALLASNearly 5,000 people attended a recent Ten Commandments rally in Dallas to discuss the “importance of God in politics,” news reports said. But a Texas Baptist ethics leader later raised concerns about the event and the movement it represents.

“Does there need to be a rally for the Ten Commandments? Yes, but it doesn't need to be a rally about the government,” said Phil Strickland, director of the Christian Life Commission of the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

“I understand the deep longing in our culture for moral anchors. We need those anchors. It is obvious that the values that drive much of our culture are often promiscuity, greed, materialism and violence.”

But Strickland said: “The first response to that has to be in the churches. It will be redeemed people who will hold highest the New Testament values.”

The event in Dallas launched a “One Nation Under God” project, which is a citizen activism initiative sponsored by Alan Keyes’ RenewAmerica, according to the organization’s web site. Keyes ran for president in 2000.

Mary Parker Lewis, chief of staff for RenewAmerica, said the project is to “restore religious liberty and judicial restraint in America … by openly challenging current public policies that remove religious content from our national life, or that repress the public expression of religious conviction,” the web site story reported.

The CLC’s Strickland has another concern—separation of church and state.

“I’m amazed that so-called conservative people want big government running their religious teaching. It is not the role of government to become our religious teacher,” he said.

“The separation of church and state is what (the Founding Fathers) meant when they created the First Amendment, which assures our free exercise and no establishment of religion.”

The separation of church and state has allowed religious expression to thrive in America, Strickland said.

“The church’s role in the public square is to be a voice for the moral concerns depicted in the Old and New testaments,” he said. “We are to be a voice for justice, a voice for the poor, a voice for religious liberty.”

Strickland expressed the long-held position of many Baptists, but there are others who see the relationship between church and state differently.

One participant at the rally told the Dallas Morning News that he feels obliged to ensure that the political system is influenced by God. Nathan Dearyan, 38, told the newspaper: “I don’t believe in the separation between church and state.”

The posting of the Ten Commandments on public property has become one of the flash points in the debate. Former Alabama Chief Justice Roy Moore spoke at the rally. Moore was removed from that state's highest court last year when he refused to obey a federal court order to take down a Ten Commandments monument he had put in the rotunda of the state's judicial building.

"We need to wake up to the issues that are facing our country," he said, according to the Morning News. "I feel kind of like it's my obligation."

The CLC's Strickland affirmed the Ten Commandments as a "moral guide for our culture," but he said they should be "interpreted in the light of the teachings of Jesus," which point to grace and redemption. Christians see the Commandments "in the light of grace instead of the light of legalism."

"I hope the churches take seriously the teaching of the Ten Commandments ... as a part of our faith."

Strickland said he was saddened recently when a pastor called him insisting that the government ought to be putting the Ten Commandments on government grounds and ought to be teaching them as religion.

When asked to state the Commandments, Strickland said the pastor could recall six. When asked if they were posted in his church, the pastor answered no. When asked if the Commandments are taught on a regular basis in the church, the answer was, "Not that I know of."

"We undercut the profound truths ... and the moral instruction of the Ten Commandments when we give responsibility of teaching to the government and don't embrace that responsibility in the churches," Strickland said.