

Bush praises Baptists as 'soldiers in the army of compassion'_62705

June 26, 2005

Posted: 6/24/05

President Bush addresses Southern Baptist Convention messengers by satellite video.
(Photo by John Swain/BP)

Bush praises Baptists as 'soldiers in the army of compassion'

By Tony Cartledge

North Carolina Biblical Recorder

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP)-Touting his desire to build a "more compassionate society," President Bush thanked Southern Baptists June 21

for being “soldiers in the army of compassion” who make a difference in America and the world.

In the process, he singled out as an example of that “army of compassion” a Florida church affiliated with the moderate Coop-erative Baptist Fellowship rather than the Southern Baptist Convention.

Bush spoke to the SBC by live video from the White House. This marked the fourth year in a row that Bush has addressed SBC messengers—all by live satellite except for 2003, when he sent a taped message.

Bush quoted George Washington as saying that America's Baptists were the “firm friends of liberty.” “Today another president George W. thanks you because more than two centuries later, you remain firm in your dedication to God and country.”

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"You believe that the ideal of religious liberty is a free church in a free state," he said, describing freedom as "a divine gift that carries serious responsibilities" to build a more compassionate society.

Bush touched on four elements known to resonate with many Southern Baptists—a proposed "family amendment" designed to prevent homosexuals from marrying, continuing legislation to curtail the practice of abortion, the appointment of more conservative judges and government aid for faith-based organizations.

"Building a more compassionate society begins with preserving the source of compassion—the family," he said.

"Southern Baptists are practicing compassion by defending family and the sacred institution of marriage," he continued, to loud and sustained applause.

"Because marriage is a sacred institution and the foundation of society, it should not be redefined by local officials and activist judges," he said, to another round of cheers.

"For the good of (the) legal system, I will continue to nominate federal judges who faithfully interpret the law and do not legislate from the bench," Bush said, calling for all of his nominees to get an up or down vote on the floor of the U.S. Senate. He thanked Southern Baptists for their "strong support" in that effort.

"Building a compassionate society also depends on building a culture of life," Bush said, one that "defends its most vulnerable members at every stage of life" and "supports principles of ethical science."

Ethical science must preserve human dignity, Bush said, citing his opposition to cloning and partial-birth abortion.

"A compassionate society will not sanction the creation of life only to destroy it," he said.

"Finally, building a compassionate society requires that we mobilize our nation's armies of compassion to help the poor, the sick, and those who hurt."

Faith-based institutions change hearts every day, but the government has discriminated against faith-based programs, he said. "That's why I signed an executive order that said that faith groups providing social services are entitled to the same access to federal money as other groups . . .

"Faith based groups should never have to forfeit their religious liberty to get federal dollars," he said. "We want your help, we want your love, but at the same time you do not have to forget the mission of faith or ignore the mission of faith that calls you to action in the first place."

Bush said billions of dollars had been made available to faith-based groups, citing a \$5.8 million grant to College Park Baptist Church in Orlando, Fla., to build 68 homes for low-income seniors. Ironically, College Park sent money to the SBC from 1928 to January 2004 but now affiliates with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, which is composed largely of Baptist churches opposed to the SBC's rightward shift.

The church received government money for its social ministries beginning 22 years ago, long before Bush's faith-based initiatives, Pastor Ron Crawford noted.

With additional reporting by Analiz Gonzalez of Associated Baptist Press.

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