

Faithful called to shore up wall of separation

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By Marv Knox

Editor

Although some Americans want to knock down the “wall of separation” between church and state, people of faith who understand their heritage must resist those efforts, U.S. Rep. Chet Edwards told participants at the T.B. Maston Christian Ethics Awards banquet.

Edwards received the 2005 Maston Award for his stalwart defense of religious liberty, announced Jimmy Allen, chairman of the T.B. Maston Foundation. The organization's namesake was a longtime professor of Christian ethics at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth.

“It is inconceivable that Americans would consider dismantling the wall that separates church and state. But the chisels are out in many forms,” said Edwards, who represents Texas' 17th Congressional District, which stretches from the southern suburbs of Fort Worth, through Waco and parts of Central Texas, down to the Bryan/College Station area.

Edwards addressed the banquet through a videotape and live telephone

feed. He originally intended to attend the Nov. 18 banquet in Dallas, but he stayed in Washington to vote in a rare Friday night session of Congress.

He cited several examples of the “chisels” that would knock down or bore holes in the legal/philosophical wall that separates church and state in America.

They include the “so-called faith-based programs” that would impose religious qualifications for some federally funded jobs, he said. Another is a proposal to provide government funding for construction of churches destroyed or damaged by Hurricane Katrina.

And a bill that would allow pastors to endorse political candidates from their pulpits “will divide churches like nothing else,” Edwards predicted. “It would demean the spirit of purity of our houses of worship.”

“The threat against church-state separation is well-funded. It has misled the American people,” he said. The idea of separation between church and state “now has a negative connotation for the majority of Americans,” he noted, adding, “That has frightening implications. ...

“‘Separation of church and state’ doesn’t mean keeping Christians out of government, but government out of church.”

Although Christians and others currently find themselves on the defensive, the battle for religious liberty is winnable, Edwards said. He suggested several actions they must take to preserve freedom of religion:

“People of faith must become the face of the defense of religious liberty,” he said. The cause is harmed when atheists and other unbelievers take the lead, he said, insisting many Christians and others of strong religious conviction advocate church-state separation specifically because of those convictions.

- ◆ “We need a better-educated public,” he added, recommending the use of public-opinion polls “to find out where our message misses the mark.”
- ◆ “We must have a long-term media strategy,” he suggested, noting adversaries of church-state separation are extremely media-savvy.
- ◆ “We must create a nonpartisan 'Madison-Jefferson list,'" he urged. Such an index would help religious liberty advocates channel small campaign contributions to like-minded political candidates who are under attack for their views on church-state separation.
- ◆ “We need to build a grassroots network in every congressional district,” he said. “We've got to let legislators know there is support for church-state separation.”

News of religion, faith, missions, Bible study and Christian ministry among Texas Baptist churches, in the BGCT, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and around the world.