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**By Greg Warner**

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LITTLE ROCK, Ark. (ABP)—Republican presidential candidate Mike Huckabee has cancelled plans to speak at the [New Baptist Covenant Celebration](#) next January because of organizer Jimmy Carter's recent criticism of President Bush.

Carter criticized Bush's foreign policy in a May 19 interview with the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette. "I think as far as the adverse impact on the nation around the world, this administration has been the worst in history," Carter said.

A Huckabee spokesperson confirmed May 21 that the candidate and former Baptist pastor is withdrawing from the unprecedented Jan. 30-Feb. 1 Baptist gathering, organized by Carter and Mercer University President Bill Underwood to promote unity among the continent's Baptists.

"While I continue to have great respect for President Carter as a fellow

Christian believer and Baptist, I'm deeply disappointed by the unusually harsh comments made in my state this past weekend regarding President Bush and feel that it represents an unprecedented personal attack on a sitting president by a former president, which is unbecoming the office as well as unbecoming to one whose conference is supposed to be about civility and bringing people together," Huckabee, former governor of Arkansas, told the *Florida Baptist Witness*, a conservative newspaper affiliated with the Florida Baptist Convention.

Carter did not respond to a request to comment on Huckabee's decision. But other organizers downplayed the candidate's decision and emphasized the non-partisan goals of the Covenant meeting.

Huckabee was one of three prominent Republican politicians added to the New Baptist Covenant lineup May 17 in an announcement by Carter and other organizers. The other Republicans are Senators Lindsay Graham (S.C.) and Charles Grassley (Iowa). Among those already on board to speak are Carter, former President Bill Clinton, former vice president Al Gore, and journalist and author Bill Moyers.

Organizers hope to attract 20,000 people to the Atlanta gathering, billed as the broadest Baptist meeting in America since Baptists split over slavery before the Civil War. But the largest Baptist denomination, the Southern Baptist Convention has declined to participate.

Organizers acknowledged Huckabee did not contact them directly before announcing his withdrawal through a Southern Baptist-affiliated newspaper.

"While we are disappointed to learn of Governor Huckabee's withdrawal through a Baptist state paper, we are enthusiastic about the excellent program that is shaping up for next year's New Baptist Covenant Celebration in Atlanta," program chairman Jimmy Allen said in a prepared

statement.

“We are looking forward to celebrating our traditional Baptist values, including sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ and its implications for public and private morality. The speakers who have committed to the program will be exploring our obligation as Christians to spread the gospel, to promote peace with justice, to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, care for the sick and the marginalized, welcome the strangers among us, and promote religious liberty and respect for religious diversity.”

Other participants said Huckabee is misreading the Covenant’s intentions.

“It is unfortunate that Mike Huckabee is letting comments made in the political arena determine his participation in a purely Christian event designed to bring Baptists together across racial, geographic, economic and social barriers,” said Alan Stanford, executive director of the North American Baptist Fellowship, a network of 40 Baptist denominations and organizations.

“Democrats Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton and Republicans Charles Grassley and Lindsey Graham are rising above their profession as politicians to join together in their common Christian commitment to alleviate poverty, AIDS, racism and other grave problems that confront both our nation and our world. That kind of Christian commitment that places doing the right thing above party politics is the key to us coming together to make a real difference in our nation and across the world.”

“The [New] Baptist Covenant meeting has never been about politics but about Jesus and unity,” said David Currie, executive director of Texas Baptists Committed. “The fact is, if we have a meeting and only preachers preach, the national press will not cover our message. If prominent politicians of both parties speak, the national press will cover it. I am sorry

Gov. Huckabee withdrew, as I have been impressed with him on TV several times. But I'm sure the Religious Right put great pressure upon him. I wish him well."

The Covenant roster features four Baptist preachers, including two African-Americans— Charles Adams, pastor of Hartford Baptist Church in Detroit and past president of the Progressive National Baptist Convention, and William Shaw, pastor of White Rock Baptist Church in Philadelphia and president of the National Baptist Convention USA Inc., largest of the four main black Baptist denominations—a female pastor, Julie Pennington-Russell, pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in Waco; and preaching professor Joel Gregory of Truett Theological Seminary at Baylor University and former pastor of First Baptist Church of Dallas.

Two social activists will address the gathering—Tony Campolo, professor emeritus at Eastern University, an American Baptist school, and founder of the Evangelical Association for the Promotion of Education, and Marian Wright Edelman, civil-rights veteran and founder of the Children's Defense Fund in Washington, D.C., who is a lawyer and Baptist pastor's daughter.

Huckabee cited the "very, very liberal" Edelman as an example of the left-leaning character of the meeting. He told the Witness he "tentatively" agreed to participate in the meeting "with the understanding that it was a celebration of faith and not a political convocation." He withdrew so he would not appear "to be giving approval to what could be a political, rather than spiritual agenda," he said.

Allen said May 17 that Huckabee, who is trailing the field of Republican candidates, had agreed to speak whether or not he is still in the race in January.

Although the meeting will occur in the heat of the presidential-nomination season, Carter eschewed any political intention for the gathering. Clinton's

involvement sparked criticism the event would become a campaign rally for wife Hillary, the Democratic presidential frontrunner.

“Ironically, by dropping out of the celebration because of political comments with which he disagreed, Huckabee demonstrated why the celebration is so desperately needed. Baptists are tragically divided and polarized,” said Brian Kaylor of the Baptist General Convention of Missouri, one of the organizers.

“We must come together to show that our unified faith and values are more important than political, racial, or other differences. The compassionate gospel of Christ is what our divided world needs. I hope that Huckabee will reconsider.”

Carter acknowledged May 17 the Covenant effort was slowed initially by criticism the group was dominated by Democrats. But the group’s effort to enlist Republican speakers was “completely successful,” Carter said.

In Carter’s interview with the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, he also said Bush’s efforts to expand government funding of churches and other religious organizations that provide social services—the so-called faith-based initiatives—violate the former president’s religious principles.

“As a traditional Baptist, I’ve always believed in separation of church and state and honored that premise when I was president,” he said, adding, “And so have all other presidents, I might say, except this one.”

Carter was in Arkansas to promote “Sunday Mornings in Plains,” a collection of audio recordings of the famous Sunday school lessons he teaches weekly at Maranatha Baptist Church in his hometown of Plains, Ga.

The White House, asked May 20 about Carter’s criticism, dismissed the former president as “increasingly irrelevant.” The brush-off from Bush spokesman Tony Fratto came during a regular press briefing at Bush’s

ranch in Crawford, where he was on vacation.

*Robert Marus of Associated Baptist Press contributed to this story.*

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