

Daniel Vestal counters BP column that said CBF not “truly Christian”

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ATLANTA (ABP) — Why would some Baptist writers go out of their way to create the impression that the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship is not even Christian?

CBF Executive Coordinator Daniel Vestal said he is trying to answer that question after the Southern Baptist Convention’s news agency published a column claiming the Fellowship was neither Baptist nor Christian at all.

“It pained me that people have been offended and hurt by this confusion about what CBF believes. I want to make clear that CBF is Christ-centered and trinitarian in its theology,” asserted Vestal. “CBF is clear in its affirmation of the core commitment to the triune God. Our commitment to Christ as the savior for the whole world stems from our trinitarian faith.”

Vestal responded to the column by James Smith, editor of the *Florida Baptist Witness*, which Baptist Press published nationwide June 25.

“Here's the bottom line,” Smith wrote. “It's long past time to declare the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship is no longer truly Christian, let alone Baptist.”

Promotion of "heresy"

Smith conceded that some — perhaps even most — individuals in the CBF are Christians. But he contended they are ill informed about what he called CBF’s promotion of “heresy.”

Smith's words were apparently inspired by comments made at CBF's recent annual meeting by John Killinger. The Presbyterian pastor and author led three of about 60 breakout sessions at the meeting.

According to multiple reports, in one session Killinger said: "Now we are re-evaluating and we're approaching everything with a humbler perspective and seeing God's hand working in Christ, but not necessarily as the incarnate God in our midst. Now, that may be hard for you to hear depending on where you are coming from, but we can talk more about it."

Some of Killinger's comments were first reported by BP, which sent reporters to cover the CBF general assembly in Memphis, Tenn.

Killinger is currently executive minister and theologian-in-residence at Marble Collegiate Church in New York — the pulpit from which the late Norman Vincent Peale rose to fame.

"Jesus is Lord" only confession of early Christians

Vestal denounced the theology Killinger expressed. "The only confession of the [early] Christian church was 'Jesus is Lord,'" he said. "To make that confession cost many people their lives because of its radical claim. To say and believe that Jesus is Lord was to say and believe that Jesus of Nazareth is God. It was a clear affirmation of the deity of Jesus. And the Incarnation of God in the man Jesus is the cornerstone of the Christian faith.

"And so for somebody in one of our workshops to question the Incarnation is simply very painful for me," Vestal continued. "I have known John Killinger to be a popular Presbyterian preacher. He was a professor at Samford University. ... But we had no idea that his views on Christ were what he declared in this breakout session. His perspective is deeply troubling to me."

Vestal's own views on the lordship of Christ are made clear in his book,

Being the Presence of Christ, just published by the Upper Room. The book's premise, according to Vestal, is "that all the gospels were written from the perspective of the Resurrection, and the living Christ is none other than the incarnate Christ that was proclaimed in the pages of Scripture."

Regrets giving Killinger a platform

Vestal said he regretted allowing Killinger to challenge such christological views at a CBF event. "I feel like that we gave him a platform at the general assembly," he said. "We do allow freedom of exchange and ideas that people disagree on. But if we had known then what we know now about his christology, he would not have been invited."

Vestal conceded, however, that CBF planners should have paid more attention to Killinger's theological shifts. "I accept the responsibility for that. Obviously the staff and I had heard him speak. We knew him to be a popular preacher, but we did not know of his christological views. Should we have known that? Yes, we probably should have, and we will do more due diligence in the future."

He continued, "We try to invite people who have different perspectives on a lot of issues, but the issue of the Incarnation is foundational. That's central. That's core gospel."

But Vestal strongly objected to Smith's characterization of the CBF as non-Christian.

"This is very personal for me and also very personal for Cooperative Baptist Fellowship," he said. "... For some editors to write and insinuate that we are not Christians is very painful for me."

Vestal questioned BP's motives in regularly investing thousands of dollars in denominational resources to send reporters to cover the annual meeting of CBF, a group that is dwarfed in size by the SBC.

He said he believes they attend “to find things in our assembly, either in a breakout session or in a line that someone makes, that they can use then to somehow paint everybody in the CBF in a certain way.”

BP: "No comment"

Will Hall, executive editor of Baptist Press and the SBC’s chief public-relations officer, said his only reaction to Vestal was, “I really don’t have any comment. We’re a news service.”

The SBC agency sends reporters to the event annually. In the past, they have frequently produced stories highlighting general assembly speakers, workshop leaders or exhibitor organizations who may hold beliefs that some conservative Southern Baptists would find questionable.

In 2000, many general assembly attendees accused BP writer Russell Moore of inaccuracies and blatant fabrications in several stories — most notably a report where he claimed that a former missionary attending the meeting physically assaulted him. Moore is now a dean at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Vestal said BP missed a great opportunity at this year’s assembly to celebrate a fellow Baptist group’s successes in kingdom work.

“This was one of the best gatherings we have had. It was just a wonderful, wonderful meeting. Wednesday night we had a special commissioning service. We appointed 18 new missionaries that are going to some of the most difficult, dangerous places in the world.”

According to Vestal, the meeting was “a high and holy moment” that included inspiring worship, corporate prayer and discernment about the organization’s future, and affirmation of CBF’s commitment to the Millennium Development Goals and the Micah Challenge.

Jim White is editor of the Religious Herald. Robert Marus contributed to this story.

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[James Smith BP column attacking CBF](#)