BJC supporters warned of â□□Christian nationalists,â□□ honor Gardner Taylor

June 26, 2010

CHARLOTTE, N.C. (ABP) — The culture warriors who contend that the United States is a “Christian nation” gravely endanger freedoms sacred to both Christianity and the nation, Mercer University President Bill Underwood warned supporters of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty June 25.

Underwood’s warning came during the BJC’s annual Religious Liberty Council luncheon at the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship General Assembly meeting in Charlotte, N.C. The group — the BJC's individual-donor wing — also elected new officers and honored legendary African-American Baptist pastor Gardner Taylor.

Mercer University President Bill Underwood addresses Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty supporters during the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship General Assembly June 25 in Charlotte, N.C. (CBF photo)

Underwood noted that, when he was a young boy in the late 1950s and

early 1960s, there was a broad consensus in the United States about the value of church-state separation "as one of the cornerstones of liberty — as perhaps America's greatest contribution to democratic theory," he said.

As an example of that consensus, he quoted legendary conservative mega-pastor W.A. Criswell of the First Baptist Church of Dallas in 1960 saying that the Framers wrote "into our Constitution that church and state must be, in this nation, forever separate and free."

But the church-state consensus, he noted, broke down quickly after Supreme Court decisions in 1962 and 1963 banned government-sanctioned prayers in public schools. With the rise of the Religious Right as a national political force in the 1970s and 80s, some began to question the appropriateness of church-state separation at all.

By 1984, Underwood observed, Criswell himself had changed his tune dramatically. During the Republican National Convention that year, he said, "I believe this notion of the separation of church and state was the figment of some infidel's imagination."

But such stridency is unnecessary, Underwood contended — because the Supreme Court hasn't kicked God out of schools, and because government-sponsored religion is itself an affront to both Christianity and the Constitution.

He noted that doubts about church-state separation have crept into the highest levels of government — with Supreme Court justices claiming in minority opinions that it's perfectly fine for the government to favor religion over non-religion and prominent politicians denigrating church-state separation.

He quoted former GOP vice-presidential nominee Sarah Palin from a May appearance on Fox News in which she said that policy makers should return "to what our founders and our founding documents meant — they're

quite clear — that we would create law based on the God of the bible and the Ten Commandments."

Underwood begged to differ. "The United States Constitution is a secular document. It makes no mention of God, a Creator or a Supreme Being of any sort. It doesn't mention the Bible," he said. "Nor is it true that our legal system is founded on the Ten Commandments. To the contrary, our laws don't prohibit blasphemy, coveting, lying, adultery or failing to honor our parents."

But, he said, although adherents of the view that America is a Christian nation are "wrong about our history and wrong about our Constitution," such "Christian nationalists are nonetheless gaining ground." He referred to polls that majorities of Americans believe the founders wrote Christianity into the Constitution, that America is a Christian nation and that teachers in public schools should be allowed to lead their students in prayer.

"These views are the result of a relentless campaign by Christian nationalists to rewrite our nation's history," Underwood said. "This fight for narrative control of American history has now expanded beyond home schools and some private Christian academies to our public schools, with the Texas State Board of Education seeking to place an ideological imprint on history, social-studies and science courses — including writing separation of church and state out of the history lessons taught to future generations of Americans."

Which God, which prayers?

Legendary preacher and civil-rights leader Gardner Taylor (left) receives the Baptist Joint Committee's J.M. Dawson Religious Liberty Award. At right is Taylor's friend and the BJC's longtime executive director, James Dunn. (BJC photo)

If "Christian nationalists" triumph by gaining ground on the Supreme Court and changing long-standing interpretations of the Constitution, Underwood said, what would a "Christian nation" look like? If government-sanctioned prayer returned in public schools, for instance, what would the prayers say?

"I suppose it will depend on which Christian God we are praying to," Underwood said. "Will we pray to the God of wrath and vengeance that many Christians worship — the God who two prominent Baptist clerics credited with bringing the 9/11 attack as revenge for America supporting the agenda 'of the pagans, the abortionists, the feminists and the gays and

lesbians,'" he said, referring to an on-air conversation between broadcaster Pat Robertson and the late Jerry Falwell in the days after Sept. 11, 2001.

"Or will we pray to the very different God of love and grace that many other Christians worship?" Underwood added, saying those Christians are

the ones who tend to take Jesus seriously when he enjoins believers from showy public prayer rituals.

“Who will write the prayers?” he asked. He said that, once elected officials become involved, political fights over which official prayers or interpretations of Bible passages are allowed would cause the current partisan acrimony to pale in comparison to elections that hinge on theological differences.

“Why would we want to trade the strength, vitality and authenticity of religious experience in America for the empty edifice of state religion?” Underwood asked. “Is our goal to change people’s hearts — or to twist their arms?”

Dawson Awards

After Underwood’s speech, BJC officials gave both Underwood and Gardner Taylor their J.M. Dawson Religious Liberty Award. Taylor is the retired pastor of Concord Baptist Church in Brooklyn, N.Y., and has repeatedly been honored as one of the nation’s best pulpiteers and called by *Time* magazine the “dean of the nation’s black preachers.” A leader in the Civil Rights Movement and one of the founders of the Progressive National Baptist Convention, Taylor is also a longtime supporter of the BJC.

In other business, members of the Religious Liberty Council re-elected their officers — co-chairs Mark Wiggs of Mississippi and Mary Elizabeth Hanchey of North Carolina and secretary Reba Cobb of Kentucky. They also elected and re-elected board members. Marc Heflin of Arkansas, Ashlee Ross of Texas and Gary Walker of Florida were re-elected to three year terms. Mark Edwards of North Carolina, Mandy Tyler of Texas and Joe Cutter of Kansas were elected to their first terms on the board.

–Robert Marus is managing editor and Washington bureau chief for Associated Baptist Press.