

Evangelical leaders protest race in sentencing

November 22, 2013

Baptists are among 27 evangelical leaders who signed a Nov. 21 letter on behalf of an African-American man condemned to death after his sentencing jury was told he was likely to be a future danger because of his race.

Texas Baptists who signed the letter asking Harris County District Attorney Devon Anderson to allow a new hearing for Duane Buck, a black man on death row for double murder, included Paul Basden and Jim Johnson, pastors of Preston Trail Community Church in Frisco; Roger Olson, the Foy Valentine professor of Christian theology and ethics at Baylor University's Truett Theological Seminary; and Chris Seay, pastor of Ecclesia in Houston.



Duane BuckThe evangelical leaders joined more than 100 civil rights leaders, elected officials, former prosecutors and judges and a former Texas governor advocating on Buck's behalf after a Texas court of appeals voted 5-3 to reject his appeal and allow the DA's office to set a date for his death by lethal injection.

Buck was convicted in 1997 for the murders of his ex-girlfriend, Debra Gardner, and the man who was with her, Kenneth Butler. He also shot a third person, but she survived.

Race called a factor in ‘dangerousness’

In testimony, an expert witness listed race among “statistical factors we know to predict future dangerousness.” The psychologist was cited later for giving racially influenced testimony to juries. Seven cases, including Buck’s, were identified. The other six were granted resentencing hearings, but Buck’s was denied.

“As evangelical Christians, we are disturbed by the impact of racial bias on our justice system,” the faith leaders said. “We are all created in the image of God, and race should never blind us to that fundamental truth in our interactions with others. Racial discrimination in any form is incompatible with Christ’s message in the Gospels—it should have no room in our hearts or in our justice system.”

Buck now a Christian

The letter signers also cited the fact that Buck is now a Christian, who has expressed deep remorse for his crimes and never received a disciplinary write-up during his incarceration.

Others signing the letter included Alan Bean, an ordained American Baptist minister who leads the Arlington-based Friends of Justice; David Gushee, ethics professor and director of the Center for Theology and Public Life at Mercer University; Shaine Claiborne of The Simple Way in Philadelphia; Fisher Humphreys, retired professor at Samford University; Christian author Brian McLaren; Sojourners founder Jim Wallis; and Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, associate pastor of St. John’s Missionary Baptist Church in Durham, N.C.