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# McDermott the Missiologist: The Congressman Lectures Southern Baptists on Evangelism

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Rep. Jim McDermott is a man on a mission. The congressman represents Washington state's 7th district, and he is known as one of the most liberal members of the U. S. House of Representatives. His crusading efforts for the liberal cause include advocacy of national health insurance, defense of partial-birth abortion, and support for gay rights-including homosexual marriages.

Now McDermott has thrown himself into controversy over Southern Baptist prayer guides for the conversion of Hindus, and he has put the weight of his congressional office behind his attack.

In an October 28 "Dear Colleague" letter sent to all 434 of his fellow House members, McDermott charged Southern Baptists with "an aggressive, intolerant approach," and "an intolerant view that has inflamed Hindu communities worldwide." McDermott's letter, sent on official congressional stationery, was accompanied by a draft letter McDermott wrote to Morris Chapman, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Executive Committee. McDermott asked fellow House members to join his letter, which lambastes the Southern Baptist efforts and asks the SBC to "end your conversion campaign directed to members of the Hindu faith."

The actual letter to Chapman was released November 5, and carried the signatures of McDermott and six other congressmen. The revised letter again called for Southern Baptists to end the missionary effort, but toned down some of McDermott's original rhetoric. Nevertheless, the letter included this ominous statement: "We cannot understand how men and women, raised and educated in the world's bastion of religious freedom and tolerance, can characterize another religion as spiritually dark and false. The lack of respect that this statement shows for the basic rights of an individual to believe in whatever faith they choose is perhaps the most disturbing."

It is McDermott's letter that should disturb American taxpayers, who must be outraged at the congressman's intrusion into the evangelism efforts of American Christians, which are, after all, supposedly protected by the Bill of Rights. Should a Member of Congress lecture Southern Baptists about evangelism? The very question indicates how far American culture has shifted to a radical embrace of "tolerance" as the national ideal.

Chapman responded to McDermott in a Nov. 18 letter that defended conversionist missions, taking the gospel "to every person, of every ethnic background, in every place in the earth." Further, "your letter presents us with a real dilemma. Do we attempt to obey God, or do we take our signals from some Hindu spokesmen . . . or from persons such as you who counsel 'a more tolerant and enlightened' approach?"

McDermott's offense was directed at a prayer guide published by the SBC International Mission Board, intended to encourage Southern Baptists to pray for the conversion of Hindus to Christ. The guide was intended to be used during the Hindu festival of Diwali, and was similar to other guides dealing with Judaism and Islam.

Chapman's letter strongly objected to McDermott's intrusion: "we believe the attempt to use any governmental office

to pressure Christians to change their doctrines or practices is improper and reprehensible.”

McDermott’s letter also surprised some of his fellow House members, who had never seen a “Dear Colleague” letter attack a major American denomination for its doctrine. The outrage spread as copies of McDermott’s letter landed outside congressional offices.

Others were perplexed by McDermott’s rewriting of India’s history in terms of religious liberty. “India has been one of the great bulwarks in her commitment to secularism and the belief that all men and women have a right to believe in their own faith,” McDermott wrote. “Hinduism has lasted for thousands of years and espouses a fundamental respect for all creeds and ways of life.”

Anyone aware of the intense sectarian strife that has marked India from its beginning as a nation must find McDermott’s statements uninformed, if not ludicrous. Recent massacres and the murder of Christian missionaries are a strange way to demonstrate “fundamental respect.” Interestingly, McDermott’s congressional stationery lists him as co-chairman of the “U.S.-India Interparliamentary Working Group,” a loose-knit organization that sponsors exchanges between U.S. and Indian politicians.

McDermott, a graduate of Wheaton College, is now notorious as the congressman who leaked an illegal recording of a cellular phone call between then-Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Georgia) and Rep. John Boehner (R-Ohio)-and did so as a member of the House Ethics Committee. The issue has thrown an ethical cloud over McDermott’s career, and his troubles are not over. This past week a U.S. Court of Appeals ruled that a criminal investigation into McDermott’s involvement be restarted, even as Rep. Boehner is suing McDermott for damages.

The congressional letter came just as a group of Chicago religious leaders asked Southern Baptists to cancel plans for an evangelistic effort planned for next summer as a part of the SBC’s “Strategic Focus Cities” initiative. The “Council of Religious Leaders of Metropolitan Chicago” lectured Southern Baptists that “While we are confident that your volunteers would come with entirely peaceful intentions, a campaign of the nature and scope you envision could contribute to a climate conducive to hate crimes.”

Evangelism is now the cause of “hate crimes?” Are these Chicago church leaders so afraid of gospel evangelism that they will hide behind the politically correct ethic of tolerance and thus oppose what the New Testament commands? This groups sounds like the Sanhedrin judging Peter and John in Acts 4: “Let us warn them to speak no longer to any man in this [Jesus’] name.” Do they really believe that conversion is a “hate crime?”

This is theological cowardice posing as courage and compassion. These so-called religious leaders have thrown their lot with Congressman McDermott and his offensive against Christian evangelism. What they oppose is the gospel of Jesus Christ. Their greatest fear is that someone, somewhere, for some reason, may be offended by gospel witness. The result of their cowardice and compromise-if followed by others-would be that no one, anywhere, by any means, would be confronted with the authentic gospel.

Evangelical Christians now face a critical time of testing. Today it is the Southern Baptists, but the attack is directed to any church or denomination that believes in what the late Francis Schaeffer called “true truth,” and obeys the Great Commission. In post-Christian America, the gospel is an offense to reason and a threat to civic order. To preach Christ is to risk being charged with a hate crime, and to pray for the conversion of non-Christians is intolerant. To describe those without Christ as “lost” and in “darkness” is outside the pale of enlightened and acceptable conduct, according to Rep. McDermott and the Chicago “religious leaders.”

The church has heard all this before-and heard it early. The apostles faced the same charges and bore the same burden. We should respond to these modern inquisitors just as Peter and John responded to the “religious leaders” in Jerusalem: “Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; for we cannot stop taking about what we have seen and heard.”

The McDermott letter is a wake-up call for evangelical Christians. This warning to the Southern Baptists came on congressional stationery. What comes next?

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