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President Clinton's Spiritual Enablers Reaping an Unholy Harvest

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Americans attempting to reconcile President Clinton's sex scandals with his membership in a Baptist church received a little assistance from the November 2 1998 issue of Newsweek magazine. The newsmagazine presented an analysis of the President as "Bill the Baptist." It goes a long way toward explaining the President - and the transformation of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Reporter Kenneth L. Woodward described Clinton as "a believer whose faith leaves plenty of license." Plenty, indeed. Woodward traced Clinton's Baptist pilgrimage from his early profession of faith to his more recent controversies, and offers a remarkable insight into the President's rather unusual notions of sin and its consequences.

Most tellingly, the article also introduces those Baptists who seem to think that the President's behavior is perfectly within acceptable bounds for the nation's chief executive and commander in chief. Woodward notes the division of Southern Baptists over the Clinton scandals, but perceptively points to far deeper issues of division - issues which led to the conservative transformation of the Southern Baptist Convention over the last twenty years.

In a nutshell, grassroots Southern Baptists arose in the late 1970s and, over the course of two decades, overthrew a liberal denominational regime that had championed a vision of Baptist identity in which Bill Clinton had felt securely at home. The denomination's conservative leadership, repulsed by the President's behavior and outraged at his policies on abortion and homosexuality, has called for the President to resign. The exiled liberal element, who prefer to call themselves moderates, love the President's policies and believe that his series of embarrassing escapades should by no means bar the completion of his term. They have become his Baptist enablers.

Woodward quotes three principal moderates in his article, and all three are well known to the Southern Baptist controversy. James Dunn, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs [BJCPA], explains that "We do good, not in order to be saved, but because we have been saved." What exactly this has to do with Clinton's sex scandals is not clear, but what is clear is Dunn's cozy friendship with the President, with whom he shares many policy goals.

For many years, Dunn was one of the most notorious irritants in the Southern Baptist Convention, leading his agency - which represents several Baptist denominations - to champion a radical vision of church-state separation that put the BJCPA into regular alignment with the liberal American Civil Liberties Union and People for the American Way. Furthermore, Dunn refused to oppose abortion on demand and regularly opposed positions the Convention championed. By 1991 the SBC had had enough, and it defunded Dunn's agency.

Dunn was thrilled when Clinton and Gore, "a couple of buddies," came to the highest offices in the land in 1993. One journalist identified Dunn as "the impresario of numerous functions for religious leaders at the White House." Directing a slap at the SBC's conservative leadership, Dunn once remarked that Bill Clinton, Al Gore, Bill Moyers, Marian Wright Edelman, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Marian Anderson "are among the real Baptists in contrast to the many faux Baptists that regularly muddy the media."

An affirmation of Dunn's view came from Marse Grant, editor emeritus of the Baptist newspaper for North Carolina,

the Biblical Recorder: "These two fine Baptist laymen [Clinton and Gore] achieved their victories with absolutely no help from the SBC inner circle." Grant went on to praise the Baptist Joint Committee and James Dunn, whose "considerable influence is enhanced by the election of Bill Clinton." Enhanced, to be sure. Dunn has attached himself so closely to the White House that it seems his main public function these days is as a Clinton apologist.

Grant suggested that the moderate Cooperative Baptist Fellowship - organized in opposition to the conservative leadership of the SBC - was where Clinton and Gore would feel at home.

Woodward looked to the CBF-supported Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond [Virginia] for historical commentary, and found what he was looking for in E. Glenn Hinson, a church historian with a penchant for scandalizing the faithful. So far as Hinson is concerned, the President's sin is none of our business. "When the President told the nation that his problems were between himself, his family, and 'our God,' that was a very Baptist statement," Hinson said. Well, let's hope not, because it is not a very Christian statement. The fact that Hinson carefully spoke of the President's "problems," rather than sins, indicates the lengths to which Clinton's ministerial apologists will go to redefine morality in keeping with the President's behavior. To call Clinton's pattern of serial adultery and lies "problems" is to relieve him of personal responsibility, and it avoids dealing with what the Bible so clearly reveals about the President's sin.

Before the conservative recovery of the Southern Baptist Convention, Hinson had taught for many years on the faculty of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Citations from Hinson's writings were, in fact, critical ammunition for the conservative movement. Hinson had argued that the birth narratives of the New Testament "are more theological interpretation than historical fact," that Jesus "may have contemplated becoming a follower of John," and that the four gospels must be discounted because they were "embellished" by the early church.

Most notoriously, Hinson had argued that the church must redefine its understanding of the Gospel "with a greater degree of tolerance" - meaning that the church must be open to salvation through other "cultures and religions." Soothingly, Hinson assured that "This would not necessitate an abandonment of monotheism nor of the conviction that some sort of special revelation occurred through Israel and Christ and the church." Some sort of special revelation? Southern Baptists were not reassured by Hinson's permission to hold onto monotheism. His radical views were enough to send grassroots Southern Baptists to the theological barricades.

The last of Woodward's gang of three is Foy Valentine who, as Woodward points out, was executive director of the SBC Christian Life Commission during Clinton's formative years. More than anyone else, Valentine represents the links between President Clinton and the old moderate Southern Baptist leadership - especially illustrated by the issue of abortion.

Speaking in 1994 to a group set up by - guess who - James Dunn and the Baptist Joint Committee, President Clinton claimed that his own position on abortion is "pretty much" in line with the resolution on abortion adopted by the SBC in 1971. Unfortunately, the President's claim is solid. The 1971 resolution, backed and supported by Foy Valentine, is one of the saddest chapters in Southern Baptist history. It put the SBC solidly in line with the pro-abortion movement. While claiming to affirm the sanctity of human life, the resolution called for Southern Baptists to push for legislation allowing for abortion "under such conditions as rape, incest, clear evidence of fetal deformity, and carefully ascertained evidence of the likelihood of damage to the emotional, mental, and physical health of the mother." In the end, the language was basically identical to that adopted by the Supreme Court in the Roe v. Wade and Doe v. Bolton decisions.

Valentine's commission was the SBC's moral concerns agency, and his twenty-seven years of leadership put the convention in line with the most liberal mainline Protestant denominations. A long-time supporter of the Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights, Valentine opposed any move by the SBC to reverse its abortion statement. Nevertheless, in 1980 the SBC turned aside the advice of its own moral concerns agency and adopted a solidly pro-life resolution. Successive statements have reaffirmed that position, calling for a constitutional amendment to outlaw abortion.

The fact that Foy Valentine headed the Christian Life Commission during the years of Clinton's early political career does go far in explaining the President's understanding of theological and ethical issues. According to Newsweek, Valentine is standing ready to affirm the President's rather Orwellian definition of adultery as well. "What he did is disgusting, but not what I would consider adultery," Valentine stated, adding that he is sure "most Baptists would agree." Of course, the last twenty years of SBC history have demonstrated that Valentine is spectacularly incompetent at knowing

what most Baptists believe.

Woodward's article goes far in explaining the President's twisted moral worldview. But it also serves as an indictment of the generation of moderate and liberal Baptist leaders who served as Bill Clinton's moral advisors - and are now his enablers in a lifestyle of gross immorality and irresponsibility. Years of theological compromise led to the collapse of any moral sense of gravity within SBC leadership as typified by Dunn, Hinson, and Valentine. The theological recovery of the last two decades started with the issue of biblical authority and inerrancy, but quickly spread to the recovery of biblical positions on ethical and moral issues as well.

"The only Baptist creed," James Dunn taunted, "is 'Ain't nobody but Jesus goin' to tell me what to believe.'" The moderate Baptist vision of the church always ends up looking like the American Civil Liberties Union at prayer. Missing from this strange "creed" is any acknowledgment of Baptist congregational responsibility - much less the authority of the Bible.

Tellingly, it turns out that Woodward interviewed Richard Land, the conservative president of the SBC's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, but chose not to use any of his statements. The ERLC is the successor to Valentine's Christian Life Commission. In the course of a recent denominational restructuring, the SBC changed the name of the agency, at least in part to indicate a break with the CLC's positions under Valentine, and the BJCPA under James Dunn. Land told Woodward what he evidently did not want to hear. "Bill Clinton must have inhabited a very different Southern Baptist universe from mine," noting that he is the same age as the President. "To me Foy Valentine was a radical liberal undermining Southern Baptist beliefs." Thankfully, not all Southern Baptists of his generation followed the President's example.

Woodward also cited two academics who offered that the moral relativism behind the President's worldview had been helpful to them as they experienced the sexual revolution of the 1960s. Tellingly, neither serves in a Baptist institution. Woodward comments: "What Jesus seemed to be telling imaginative Baptist teenagers was that they could work out their own personal rules, permitting some forms of sexual experience without feeling guilty." A quick look at the Sermon on the Mount will suffice to dismiss any suggestion that Jesus would tolerate any sexual immorality. But Foy Valentine's statement indicates that he is eager to accept the President's argument that sex short of intercourse is not adultery. For Southern Baptists wondering if the conservative recovery was necessary, what more evidence is required?

Southern Baptists will have to live with the tragic memory of these chapters in our denominational history. The nation is now living with the grotesque reality of a morally bankrupt presidency. Newsweek has demonstrated conclusively the kind of theological and spiritual influences that produce a Bill Clinton. In the Southern Baptist Convention, the rejection of those leaders produced a revolution. Only time will tell if the nation is ready to accept "Bill the Baptist" as Clinton the President.

