

BOISI CENTER INTERVIEWS



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RUSSELL MOORE is president of the Southern Baptist Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, the public policy agency of the Southern Baptist Convention. He spoke with Boisi Center associate director **Erik Owens** and undergraduate research assistant **Therese Murphy** before delivering the 13th Annual Prophetic Voices Lecture on his vision of modern evangelicals as a “prophetic minority.”

OWENS: How has your experience in government and ministry brought you to where you are? What have you drawn on in your previous experience that puts you where you are today?

MOORE: Well, I experienced what we in the Baptist context refer to as a call to ministry at a very young age. I preached my first sermon at age 12. It was a terrible sermon, but I preached it very young. Then I felt myself drifting toward wanting to have a career in public policy and politics, and started an internship with a United States Congressman that continued along for several years. I think that was a very useful thing in terms of my life—learning to see how government can work for good but also see the limits of the power of government. Having a foot in policy and a foot in the church, I think, helps me to see both sides of the spectrum here.

OWENS: Many Americans describe our country as a “Christian nation,” an account that is worrying in many ways. Can you speak a bit to how, from your position, you would counsel Christians to understand what that phrase means and what it shouldn’t mean?

MOORE: The term Christian nation could mean a variety of different things, much in the way the term fundamentalist can mean everything from a

violent radical reactionary all the way over to someone who believes the Bible is accurate. It’s not a helpful term.

“Christian nation” could be understood merely sociologically, that most people in this country identify themselves as Christians. Under those terms that’s an accurate phrase.



What many people mean when they say “Christian nation” or “Christian America,” though, is that United States of America is in a covenantal relationship with God in the way Old Testament Israel was. In that sense, no, the United States of America is not a Christian nation, it’s a nation filled with many people who are Christians. The Baptist movement in this

country came about from people who were seeking to avoid those who were claiming the prerogatives of a Christian commonwealth in order to stifle dissent. That’s one of the reasons why my heritage has articulated the concepts of religious liberty and separation of church and state. This is not secularism as is so often defined now, but a strong sense of the church as being the people of God.

OWENS: So what then does it mean, politically, for Christians to see themselves as Christians first and Americans second?

MOORE: I think it means what Jesus has given to the church in Matthew 6: “Seek first the Kingdom of God in his righteousness and all these things will be added to you.” As J. Gresham Machen, the 20th-century orthodox Presbyterian leader, put it, Christianity leads to many good social benefits, but when the Gospel is the means to the end to those benefits, we lose the Gospel. We must keep things in right priority, which means seeing ourselves as first and foremost citizens of the kingdom of God. Knowing we are citizens, in this place and in this time, helps us to keep perspective as to what is ultimate and what is temporal. So in that sense, evangelical Christians should have a thoroughly Augustinian understanding of the relationship between the City of God and the City of Man. We don’t

place ultimate confidence in any earthly regime, but we also don't lose hope and give ourselves over to despair regardless of what is going on around us, because we have confidence that the Kingdom of God is ultimately triumphant.

OWENS: Is it fair to say that in your writing you've argued that this sensibility ought also to apply to one's party affiliation?

MOORE: Well, a party affiliation is in many ways increasingly important in American culture because the parties have become much more clearly defined and much more uniform. There was a time when there were many conservative Democrats and liberal Republicans; that time seems to be gone. But it does mean that we hold those party identities loosely compared to the way we hold our Christian self-understanding as part of the Church. A person might be Republican, for instance, but is willing to express skepticism toward Republican politicians who may be selling out what they believe to be the common good on various issues. I think most evangelicals understand that at the intuitional level. Many evangelicals are Republicans simply because the Republican party isn't hostile to their concerns about life, marriage, and other issues. But if the Republican party ever reversed course on those things, evangelicals would turn away from them.

OWENS: You've said that you find yourself in some sense to the left of many evangelicals on environmental stewardship. Could you elaborate on that?

MOORE: The Scripture calls humanity, and believers in particular, to steward and guard the creation. The term *dominion*, found in the Genesis account—which is scary to many environmentalists—actually is a term that encompasses care and stewardship over the creation. Christians ought to be concerned for a variety of reasons about safeguarding the earth and our natural resources. We ought to, out of love of neighbor, be concerned about

those things that are going to harm other people. We recognize and see the creation itself as a demonstration of the glory of God, so we ought to treat it with care.

When it comes to climate change, the issues become much more difficult than they are at the local level, or even at the national level. Because even among people who agree that climate change exists, there's another question: what then do we do? And that's where I think that we lack consensus in this country. The Bible calls us to creation care, but does that necessarily mean cap and trade, and would cap and trade legislation even affect climate change? So I'm reluctant to apply Biblical texts to specific pieces of legislation. But I do think it's something that we should be concerned about.

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OWENS: It seems to me that there have been a number of victories for religious people in our schools in the past fifteen years, through increased protection of the rights of children to pray, for example. Where would you say we are in terms of religion in public schools today? Is this an area of grave concern for you?

MOORE: My primary area of concern when it comes to the public school system is mostly about failing public schools, which are in turn failing our children. I think that's something that people on the left and the right ought to be able to agree on. We must always safe-

guard the free speech rights of students, including religious speech. I think that conversation is in many ways less heated than it was several years ago. I'm not sure exactly why. Some of that has to do with court cases that have resolved issues, and some of that has to do with alternatives to the public school system that have emerged for religious people of all sorts. The issues of religious speech seem to be relevant most in terms of local city government, like in the *Greece v. Galloway* case, or the military.

OWENS: I was intrigued by comments you were reported to have said last summer when you took your new office, that you wanted to help evangelicals understand themselves not as a silent majority but rather as a prophetic minority. Prophetic witness is of course is a central theme of the Prophetic Voices lecture series you're speaking at this evening. What sort of reaction did your comments generate among evangelicals?

MOORE: A very good reaction largely, because most evangelicals are recognizing that the culture has changed dramatically around them, at least on several social issues. The culture is secularizing around them. What's not happening is the typical secularist narrative, that the United States is becoming post-religious or post-Christian. That's not happening, nor do I think that is going to happen.

What it does mean is that nominal cultural Christianity is no longer tenable in American culture, which I think is bad for America in some ways, because the Bible Belt and cultural Christianity kept some bad things from happening, in terms of family dissolution and other things. But it's good news for the church, because it enables the church to actually be a believing community with the clarity of Gospel witness.

My message to our church is that we should neither capitulate to the culture, nor should we give ourselves over to despair. The Gospel doesn't need Mayberry in order to advance. It didn't emerge in

Mayberry; it emerged in a Greco-Roman Empire that was very hostile to the basic tenets of Christianity. At every point in the Book of Acts, when the Gospel is articulated, the normal response is for people to say this sounds insane to me. If we're moving into a time where that's increasingly the case in American culture, that means that we need to speak clearly about what has been entrusted to us by the Lord Jesus and His apostles. So by prophetic voice, I mean the willingness to speak. If we're not a silent majority, neither should we be a silent minority. We mustn't say that simply because "narrow is the gate and few there are those who go into it [Matthew 7:14]," that we will sit silently in our silos. No, we need to speak the message that has been given to us, which means a call to repentance to ourselves and to the outside world, and also an offer of mercy and reconciliation with God.

OWENS: We live in an increasingly diverse country in terms of faith traditions, cultural traditions, languages, etc. How do you, as a Christian, think about finding common ground among such a diverse political entity—understanding that you're working as a Christian first, as we've discussed, but also as a very active and engaged citizen. How do you conceptualize the common good and think about working with people from different traditions?

MOORE: As a Christian I have several models for this. One of these models would be the apostle Paul in the Book of Acts, who is appealing to his Roman citizenship in terms of his religious liberty, but he's always doing so while also articulating what he believes in terms of revelation of the stewardship of the Gospel. The same thing was true for my Baptist forebears in the founding era of this country, and I think we will find ourselves increasingly in the same sort of milieu. The Baptists were speaking in New England very forthrightly on what they believe the Bible teaches, while also working for the common good. They



believed in religious liberty for all people, not simply for themselves, and they were making alliances with people with whom they disagreed sharply, without any confusion of what it is that they believed.

The early Baptists, for instance, were quite willing to work with Thomas Jefferson, at the same time that they would have been quite unwilling to receive Thomas Jefferson into their churches given what he believed—or didn't believe, more accurately. They were able to make those alliances without compromising their own convictions. I think the same thing is true in contemporary American culture. We speak what it is that we believe, and then we form alliances with people who differ sharply in order to work for the common good. One could see this happening in many ways. Conservative evangelicals will often work with traditions that we don't recognize as Christian, such as the Latter Day Saints, in order to promote common interests of religious liberty or public justice. We will work with secular feminists on some issues of concern, such as pornography and sex trafficking. Conservative evangelicals increasingly work with libertarians on issues of religious liberty and freedom of religion, even though there is very little overlap between the Gospel of Jesus Christ and Ayn Rand. However, we both recognize that a government that's able to pave over the conscience is a govern-

ment that's too big, even if we come at this conclusion for different reasons. So I think collaboration is already at work and will only increase.

MURPHY: I read that you wanted to model your political strategy after the pro-life movement because you thought it was very holistic, yet you don't want to return to the days of the voter checklist. How do you reconcile those two elements into a coherent strategy?

MOORE: Well, on some things we do speak in terms of specific legislation, but I think we must have an understanding of which issues we speak to with the authority of Scripture in the Christian tradition. Likewise, we also must understand which issues we speak to simply out of prudential wisdom. So I will speak of very specifically on legislation that would protect unborn children, for instance. I would not speak with that same level of specificity or authority to an issue like the minimum wage, or whether we should have a balanced budget amendment.

The pro-life movement, I think, has been particularly effective in working multiple levels. Working at the level of prophetic witness, the March for Life, for instance, annually sends the message to the outside world that we believe the unborn child and his or her mother are our neighbors that we ought to care for. The pro-life movement also works

at the level of love of neighbor, as crisis pregnancy centers all across the country are doing the most holistic ministry to women in crisis, single mothers. And then the movement also works incrementally toward legislative goals. I think the pro-life movement has been a good model for that, but I never would want to attach the authority of Christ to all of the things that I happen to believe. I have a position on abortion which I believe is a position that is rooted in the “thus sayeth the Lord” of Scripture. I’ll speak that way. I have a position on gun rights that is simply my opinion, and I wouldn’t speak to it that way. I’m not willing to say that some particular bill in Congress is the Christian position on that.

OWENS: This strikes me as something that we also hear from the Catholic Church, the motive of finding places where judgments are merely prudential—not unauthoritative, but not rooted in that same sort of Scriptural authority. How would you characterize relations between Catholics and evangelicals in America, both at the elite levels where you’re working, and at the level of people in the pews?

MOORE: Reading the 20th-century writings of Baptists in my tradition, almost all of them assume that the greatest threat to religious liberty in America is the Roman Catholic Church. You see warnings about the power of the Vatican, all the way from the early 1920s through JFK and right up into the 1970s. That has clearly changed. It doesn’t mean that either side has changed their convictions when it comes to those very important Reformation principles, but it does mean that I don’t see a reflexive anti-Catholicism in evangelicalism. Evangelicalism is still Protestant, and resolutely so, but we’ve been able to work together, starting with the pro-life movement, in a way that has caused evangelicals and Catholics to form deep alliances in the public square. I think the relationship between evangelicals and Catholics has never been better. Some of that has to do with a relaxing

of expectations; working with Roman Catholics doesn’t mean that Protestant Evangelicals need to abandon our understanding of *sola fide*, *sola scriptura*; and Roman Catholics working with evangelical Protestants are by no means abandoning what they believe either.

So we find those points of common overlap, which have been strikingly close in recent years. I can’t think of any organization that I work with more closely than the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. I was at an event with Archbishop Lori, Chairman

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of the Ad Hoc Committee on Religious Liberty for the Catholic bishops, and I found myself embarrassed at one point because I was quoting Martin Luther, but Archbishop Lori said, “Well, on that, I’m with Luther.” So I think that the working relationship with the evangelicals and Catholics is only going to be closer.

OWENS: The Catholic Church and the Southern Baptist Convention both face shifting demographics these days, and from what I gather, Southern Baptists are slowly on a declining number relative to the population.

One of the biggest things that the Catholic Church is wrestling to understand is the increasing prominence of Latinos in the Church. How is the rising Latino population impacting evangelicals in America, and Southern Baptists specifically?

MOORE: One of our fastest growing demographics in Southern Baptist life is the Hispanic population. That’s one of the reasons why, when I speak on issues of immigration reform, I’m not simply speaking to a political issue, I’m talking about a pastoral issue affecting our congregations and our brothers and sisters in Christ. Increasingly our Church pot-luck dinners have more salsa at them, and we like that.

OWENS: More salsa, less ketchup.

MOORE: Yeah, more salsa, less ketchup. We like it that way. So what I have often said to our people is that if the Southern Baptist Convention in the year 2030 does not have sessions in both English and in Spanish, with subtitles of the other language on the screen overhead, it will mean that we’re dead. But I don’t think that’s going to happen, because of the vitality and the growth that is happening in the Latino community.

OWENS: You’ve spoken a lot about how to recapture the millennial population, given its increasing secularization. Can you speak to your strategy and how churches are trying to reach out to that population specifically?

MOORE: I actually don’t think there is increasing secularization of the millennial generation. I think what we see is the increasing honesty of the millennial generation, as opposed to previous generations. There was a time in American history in which identification with a

church tradition brought a social good to the person. So to be able to say, *I'm Baptist or Episcopalian or Catholic*, even though one didn't believe much or didn't attend church, was still necessary in order to be seen as a good person, a good citizen, a good neighbor. Those days are ending, and I say good riddance to them. Now we have greater clarity between the church and the outside world in a way that I think is going to be healthy.

Frankly, the greatest points of vitality in my tradition right now are among very, very young people. Our fastest-growing churches are filled with very, very young people. And I find myself having the opposite conversation that many of my counterparts in other traditions are having. Many of them are having to say to elderly people, *please make room for the millennials*. I find myself much more often speaking to mega-churches and church plants filled with millennials saying, *try to make room for grandma here*. So—

OWENS: Cover the tattoos. *(laughter)*

MOORE: That's right. *(laughter)* At least every once in a while, play some old Fanny Crosby songs.

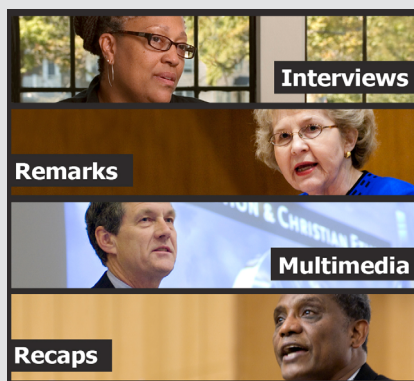
OWENS: I have one final question, which really relates to the millennial generation as well. Gender equality is right at the top of the list of concerns for most millennials; it's something that this generation takes for granted. And yet, the Southern Baptist Convention recently adopted a pretty strident statement on the male headship of family. Can you try to reconcile that with the concerns of your large millennial population?

MOORE: Well, I wouldn't refer to it as strident. It's consistent with the Baptist, Catholic, and the Eastern Orthodox traditions. We believe in complementarianism, that both men and women are of equal quality, are made in the image of God, and are equally heirs of the grace of God in Christ. But we believe that there are differences in vocation. When we speak of male headship, we don't mean the raw exercise of power; we mean a responsibility of a husband to pour out his life for his wife and for his children, as Christ loves the church [Ephesians 5]. That's entirely consistent with the great tradition of Christianity and with this Biblical text. We also believe that the pastoral vocation is given to men, as do Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox

believers. But that doesn't mean that women don't serve and exercise gifts within the context of the congregation. We believe that the genders are equal, but they're complementary. God has made men and women different for a very specific reason in order to point to the Christ-Church union and to glorify Himself.

That's something that I don't see changing in evangelicalism. As a matter of fact, a few years ago, I said that I was a complementarian, but that I feared that gender egalitarianism and evangelical feminism would ultimately win the day, because of the tides of American culture. I no longer think that's the case. There was a time when many evangelical leaders were feminists on the general issue, but in every other way were doctrinally orthodox and conservative. Those figures are no longer with us. Many of the people who have altered their view of gender have also altered their view of authority to Scripture, the doctrine of salvation and many other things.

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