

Southern Baptists urged to engage with politics, but be civil

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NASHVILLE, Tenn. (RNS) Sealed with a prayer delivered by Tennessee Gov. Bill Haslam, a Southern Baptist pastors' event made it clear: There's no separating religion and politics.

Speaker after speaker at the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission's "The Gospel & Politics" conference on Wednesday reiterated the point that it is a Christian's duty to ensure biblical principles are being upheld by elected officials.

While calling religious liberty the no. 1 issue facing the country, ERLC president Russell Moore also had strong words for evangelical keyboard activists who cry foul or squelch the religious freedom of others.

"Many times we Christians are quick to claim persecution when we're merely facing personal offense," he said. "It is not persecution when the woman at the checkout counter and Wal-Mart says 'Happy Holidays' instead of 'Merry Christmas.'"

Moore said in an interview that rank-and-file pastors were galvanized last year behind the cause of religious freedom after Houston's mayor issued—and then withdrew—subpoenas for sermons of five pastors who opposed a city ordinance protecting LGBT persons. The action shocked thousands of Baptists who never thought that could happen in America, Moore said.

Still, there's no cause for fear, he said.

"We speak truthfully about religious liberty but confidently about the heritage that we have, calling Americans back to our founding principles of freedom of conscience," Moore said. "We believe those were given by God."

The event, coming on the heels of a two-day Send North America Conference, drew 700 ministers. Both gatherings were in Nashville, home of the ERLC's parent organization, the Southern Baptist Convention.

Tuesday's event, coordinated by the denomination's North American Mission Board, included a live Q&A with Republican presidential candidate Jeb Bush and a prerecorded conversation with candidate Marco Rubio.

The candidates were chosen because they were leading the polls in May, when the conference was being planned. The GOP's Scott Walker and Democrat Hillary Clinton declined.

This week, by comparison, Donald Trump was leading by a wide margin, according to a Fox News poll.

Bush and Rubio were a welcome addition, said Charles Fowler, senior pastor of Germantown Baptist Church outside Memphis, Tennessee, who attended both events.

"We try to spend time talking about issues where moral values are in the balance—Planned Parenthood, pro-life candidates, and the like," Fowler said. "We encourage our church family to pray for these candidates and vote for people who agree where the Scriptures speak explicitly."

In addition to opposing abortion, ERLC conference speakers voiced opposition to same-sex marriage and vowed to help protect business owners who do not wish to serve such couples.

Moore said that while young evangelicals are less willing to jump into political debate, that's not an option for Christians in America.

Jennifer Marshall, a vice president of the Heritage Foundation, said it is a Christian responsibility to plunge into politics.

"Don't prognosticate—pray," she said. "Very few of us are called to be pundits."

Conference attendee Joey Nickerson, a Baptist Collegiate Ministry representative serving the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland, said he's given thought to his role as a young faith leader.

“Arguments on Facebook and Twitter don’t change anybody’s minds,” he said. “Debates don’t change people’s minds. ... Point people back to the gospel with tenderness and gentleness. Speak Christian truth. That’s what I want to convey.”

Among the speakers calling for a more civil tone in political debate was Jim Daly, president and CEO of Focus on the Family, a group that in past years was held up by liberals as driving incivility.

In an interview after his presentation, Daly said he’s ready to change that.

“Times change, tones change, and we are in a season where we have to think about the climate we are in and how we treat people who don’t believe in Jesus or embrace a Christian worldview,” Daly said.

While religious liberty is a vital topic, he said, it isn’t the most important, which he said is spreading the Christian message.

While Focus on the Family has been known for opposing hate crime measures especially in relation to gay people, Daly said he’d be willing to consider such proposals on a case-by-case basis.

“It’s similar to the Family Medical Leave Act under Clinton,” he said. “The evangelical community reacted too strongly to that because it was onerous to small-business people. When you now have time to reflect, giving a mom or dad time with a spouse in times of medical hardship or a new baby—it’s a good thing for families to pull together in those moments. I wish we had supported that.”