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Is it guilt by association or just the facts?

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How closely can a Christian leader associate with "sinners" without being labeled a sinner himself?

From Roger Moran's perspective, Baptists who serve on the boards of interfaith agencies alongside others who advocate more liberal positions on issues such as homosexuality and abortion are guilty themselves of advancing those positions.

But a variety of Baptist leaders who have been targeted by Moran's Missouri-based advocacy group believe he unfairly paints them as liberals simply because they have some professional affiliation with others who are more liberal than the typical Southern Baptist.

Is it guilt by association, as they contend? Or is it just the facts, as Moran contends?

A growing number of Texas Baptist churches are being forced to make a judgment for themselves, as literature and videos produced by Moran's Missouri Baptist Laymen's Association circulate across the state. The literature--which is critical of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs and certain leaders of the Baptist General Convention of Texas--is being distributed by individual pastors and by the Texas Baptist Laymen's Association, headed by Wichita Falls layman Bill Streich.

Streich's literature takes the basis of Moran's work and adds similar content more specifically focused on Texas. It has been distributed statewide as part of a campaign to move churches toward the new Southern Baptists of Texas Convention and away from the BGCT. Moran's and Streich's research was quoted nearly verbatim in a deacon committee report given at First Baptist Church of Dallas when the church recently voted to dually align with the new Texas convention and loosen its ties with the BGCT.

Here's an example of how Moran's approach works:

Moran believes Texas Baptists ought to be alarmed because David Currie, executive director of Texas Baptists Committed, sits on the board of the Interfaith Alliance, a non-partisan organization committed to fostering dialogue between religious perspectives.

"If you know much about the Interfaith Alliance, you know it is one of the leading pro-homosexual-left groups around," Moran charged in a recent interview. "Meg Riley serves on there with him, and she's a lesbian, openly a lesbian. She's co-chair of a group called Equal Partners in Faith (which advocates homosexual rights). ... The Interfaith Alliance is one of the members of it. Are you saying none of that stuff was ever mentioned in an Interfaith Alliance board meeting?"

Currie says this criticism of him is unfounded and is representative of the kind of "guilt by association" he believes Moran publishes. Currie firmly denies any personal support for homosexual activity or homosexual marriage.

"It's taking a little-bitty coincidence and saying this is all of reality," Currie charged.

He doesn't know the specifics of what other Interfaith Alliance board members believe on every issue, he said, and it's not his concern in working with them on the issues they can agree on, such as the need to encourage civility in religious discourse.

Linking him to support for homosexuality because someone who supports homosexuality serves on a board with him is like reporting on a baseball game by saying only that Juan Gonzales hit a home run when the actual score of the game was 14-5, Currie charged. "That's not the whole story of the ballgame. There's more to it than the fact that one individual did something."

Despite Moran's impressions, Currie said, "I've been to Interfaith Alliance board meetings for four years, and homosexuality and abortion have never been mentioned."

As for Moran's charge that the Interfaith Alliance is a member of Equal Partners in Faith, the executive coordinator of Equal Partners in Faith laughed out loud when asked by a reporter if this were true.

"We have no organizational members," said Steven Baines. Further, there is no formal link between the two organizations, he added.

And if Currie is guilty of supporting homosexuality by participating with the Interfaith Alliance, Moran ought also to indict Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, Currie said.

"Last year, Richard Land appeared at an Interfaith Alliance board meeting because we worked together on a particular issue. Does that mean he supports all these things?"

"That's the way these people operate, to try to find one little piece of reality and say it describes all of reality."

Yet Moran defends his research methods and publications as accurate and valid.

"It's not guilt by association," he said. "These are the organizations that these guys relate to. If you consistently align yourself with organizations that advocate for the acceptance of homosexual rights, ... it tells you something."

On that count, Moran takes heavy aim at the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and the Baptist Joint Committee, citing dozens of links between individuals somehow associated with the Baptist organizations and representatives of pro-homosexual causes. Many of the accusations circle back around to affiliation with Americans United for Separation of Church and State, an independent, interfaith religious liberty watchdog in Washington, D.C.

Across Texas, Moran's literature has been used to build a case against the BGCT because of its ties to the Fellowship and support for the Baptist Joint Committee.

Moran and Streich both cite the fact that James Dunn, recently retired executive director of the BJC, and Phil Strickland, director of the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission, have served on the board of Americans United.

The lightning rod in that organization is its executive director, Barry Lynn, whom Moran and Streich identify as an advocate of all manner of liberal causes, ranging from opposition to school prayer to support for legal distribution of child pornography.

Streich takes aim at this in a two-page document titled "Southern Baptists in Texas: Beware!" This was among at least two of Streich's documents that professors at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary recently were told to hand out to students, allegedly to rebut a presentation made in five classes by Strickland.

Speaking of Dunn and Strickland, Streich writes: "The BGCT funds them to speak to Texas Baptists about religious liberty, moral issues and Christian citizenship. ... By their association

and silence, they stand with humanists, homosexual activists, Unitarians and abortionists in sanctioning the work of Barry Lynn."

"I have frequently served on boards where there was a common cause, but I would not agree with many of the positions others on the board might take," Strickland said in response. "The fact that one works with many groups on gambling doesn't mean you agree with everything those people may believe. If you are a part of a group of people fighting child abuse, that doesn't mean you believe everything every person in the group believes. If you are with the Southern Baptist Convention and having joint efforts with the Catholics, that doesn't imply that you believe everything Catholics believe.

"Bill Streich knows we oppose abortion and oppose homosexual practice," Strickland said. "I'm sad that his end-justifies-the-means ethic lets him freely imply things or assert things that he knows are not true."

One of Moran's most notorious pieces, which was published in the October 1998 newsletter of Southern Baptists of Texas, is called "A Look in Contrasts." In this piece, Moran attempts to characterize in broad terms what the SBC "stands for" and what the Fellowship "stands for."

In the left-hand column he writes, "The SBC has no leaders calling for the ordination of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered persons." And then in the right-hand column, he writes, "But CBF does."

This list goes on to include 15 accusations of liberal ideology shunned by the SBC but allegedly embraced by CBF.

It was material such as this that last year prompted CBF Coordinator Daniel Vestal publicly to call for Moran to stop distributing "relentless and unwarranted attacks." As other CBF leaders have done before and after, Vestal strongly denied any accusation that the moderate missions organization advocates homosexuality or abortion.

Vestal published a lengthy response to Moran's charges, including this appeal: "The repeated insinuation and insult contained in your materials is that the real mission of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship is to promote the gay-lesbian lifestyle, abortion on demand and even child pornography. You constantly suggest that CBF has ulterior motives and hidden agendas of all kinds, rather than the one we boldly declare in our mission statement. These tactics are misguided, harmful and wrong."

Vestal admonished Moran "to put an end to these attacks, to publicly apologize for the harm you have done and to seek reconciliation with these Christian brothers and sisters."

For his part, Moran believes Vestal made no attempt to reconcile with him but sought only to "shut me up." He complains that CBF and others who charge him with slander never have come forward with documentation to refute his claims.

Some rebuttals have been published, however. The Baptist Joint Committee has published several articles refuting Moran's accusations against the BJC and its leadership. Likewise, the Fellowship has published numerous rebuttals and a brief video which counters Moran's accusations.

Yet Moran's literature continues to be distributed farther and wider, and with greater effect.

Moran contends that's because he has truth on his side. Critics contend it's because he has the upper hand as an aggressive accuser.

"The problem is that a lot of people are just mentally lazy. They're not interested in point-for-point reaction," said Doyle Sager, pastor of First Baptist Church of Jefferson City, Mo., and chairman of Mainstream Missouri Baptists, a group opposing Moran on the state level. "Moran or his troops are great at oversimplifying. It's the impression left, ... then you're put in the defensive position."

Such a use of communication technique as a political weapon isn't unique to Baptist battles, said Robert L. Heath, professor of communication at the University of Houston.

"A fact is often a fact only as it is interpreted," he said. "The classic example is that you and I can look at a glass, and that glass can have a certain amount of water in it. One of us can say the water glass is two-thirds full, and the other will say it is one-third empty."

What you see "sometimes translates into issues of expectation," he added. "One can argue that in any set of facts, the issue is the interpretation of those facts."

An example he gives in classes comes from the Cold War era in Russia. A Russian newspaper reported that its athletes had come in second in a certain competition while the U.S. athletes had come in next-to-last. What the newspaper didn't report was that there were only two teams competing.

Readers and listeners always must be on the alert to ascertain facts that might lead to false conclusions, Heath said. "Are we trying to better understand ourselves and bring our wise judgment to bear, or are we using the manipulation of facts in some more narrow way?"

Moran vehemently denies he is guilty of misrepresentation.

"Slander is a very serious thing," he said, noting the Bible's exhortation to "expel that wicked man from among you" as one penalty. "Sowing discord among the brethren is one of the things God detests.

"If I have done that, I need to be held accountable. I also believe everything I have written is absolutely accurate."