

July 14, 1959

Odle Interim Editor
Of Mississippi Paper

JACKSON, Miss.--(BP)--Joe T. Odle, associate executive secretary of Mississippi Baptist Convention board for three years, has been elected interim editor of the Baptist Record, convention weekly newspaper.

He succeeded Editor W. C. Fields on July 15, when Fields moved to Nashville, Tenn., to become public relations secretary with the Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention.

The executive committee of the Mississippi board called Odle to serve as interim editor until September, when the full board meets. The election of an editor on a permanent basis may take place then.

Odle has been pastor and denominational worker in Mississippi since 1943. A native of West Frankfort, Ill., he was pastor of First Baptist Church, Gulfport, Miss., when called to Jackson three years ago. He is a former vice-president of Mississippi Baptist Convention.

THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST INVASION: RIGHT OR WRONG?*

Blake Smith

When I accepted the invitation to speak to you on this subject I did not realize the complexity of the problem or the depth of feeling on both sides. Through correspondence and personal conversations with responsible people in both conventions I have been informed, shamed and challenged. Ministers and laymen have written or spoken very frankly and honestly about the matter. While there are differences of opinion at almost every point, I can tell you that there is a deep concern in both conventions.

Some of our most trusted leaders urged me to speak a word of peace and reconciliation. More than anything that I have ever done, that is what I want to do. But the word of reconciliation must be Christ's word, and not ours; it must be on his terms, not ours. The reconciliation which Christ brings comes to us as a word of judgment and grace, calling for repentance and faith. On no other basis can our wounds - which now are deep and raw - be healed. This is the balm in Gilead; there is no other.

THE INVASION: A FACT

Let us begin with the fact of the "invasion". It is not a threat, but a reality. Southern Baptists now have 2,600 churches in areas which prior to 1940 were recognized as Northern or American Baptist territory. Churches and missions are well established in at least 45 states of the union. Our most rapid growth is in those areas where the "invasion" is taking place. Although the over-all gain in membership for Southern Baptists in 1958 was only 2.7 percent, our gains in the "invaded" states were from five to ten times as large as the average. There is no likelihood that an expansion which is producing such impressive statistical results will be called to a halt. Whatever steps are taken toward reconciliation must begin with this fact: Southern Baptists are there to stay. Comity agreements made in the past will not help much, except to set the problem in historical perspective. A new approach must be found.

The "invasion" which has taken place since 1940 was not planned and initiated at the convention level. What happened at first was that Southern Baptists who had moved north began to gather in groups usually in their homes, for fellowship and religious edification. They constituted themselves into churches and into associations. These individual churches and associations petitioned the Southern Baptist Convention for recognition and aid. This was a new situation, not fully anticipated by the 1894 or the 1912 Agreements.

This was the problem which we faced in the initial stages of the "invasion". Partly because the new developments snowballed so rapidly and partly because each convention was too deeply involved in its own affairs to give much creative thought to the problem, the situation erupted in an unplanned and unstructured manner.

Within the last decade this movement has got out of hand and threatens the unity of Baptists on this continent more seriously than the Civil War. What is even more serious, the unity of our Baptist fellowship throughout the world is actually imperiled. Unless a spirit of unity is revived among us and structures devised within which we can cooperate, the Baptist World Alliance may be wrecked beyond repair. This is the sober judgment of some of our most trusted leaders, and it is a source of genuine spiritual agony with us, as it must be with you.

WHY THIS INVASION?

Against this very brief and inadequate background let us consider the question which is most often raised by discerning and conscientious American Baptists: Why is the "invasion" taking place? Do not Southern Baptists have enough to challenge their efforts and resources in their own territory? Why should they compete with us? Before answering this question we must ask another: What reasons do Southern Baptists give to themselves for this rapid expansion? What moves us to such stupendous and often sacrificial endeavor? This expansion has not been carried out in secret. Through every medium of communication the challenge is pressed upon us.

*Address delivered to the Ministers Council of the American Baptist Convention at their annual meeting in Des Moines, Iowa, June 4, 1959.

We are reminded that our own brethren, probably 800,000 Southern Baptists, have moved into the north. They cannot find a church home among American Baptists because your culture, your forms of worship, the hymns you sing, the structures of your church life, the substance and manner of your preaching, are all so different from what they have known as to make them seem inadequate and meaningless. The force of this argument can be understood only if we recognize the fact that the cultural aspect of our religious life is entirely different from what it is in the north. Mrs. Swain, a former president of your Convention, expressed it accurately in a letter to me when she said, "It is like living in a different country". With us the church is a primary center of social life. The things that separate us in the general culture are transcended or bridged in our church and denomination relationships. Rich and poor, learned and ignorant, those who have social status and those who have none, find a common bond of unity in our churches. The ground is still mighty level in a Southern Baptist church. This feeling of belonging to one another is achieved through the forms and structures with which all of us are familiar and in which we all participate. The songs we sing and the manner in which we sing them, the loose and sometimes crude orders of service which we follow, our method of evangelism, with the long, drawn-out and highly emotionalized invitation; the friendly atmosphere and highly personalized recognition of visitors at the worship services, the way we are organized up and down and sideways, from the cradle to the grave, -- all of these things constitute the external structures within which our people experience their oneness with one another in Christ. Of course, some souls have outgrown the necessity for these structures, but they are few.

Another argument given to stir us to greater zeal in the expansion to the north is the contention that the area of greatest spiritual dearth is north of the Mason and Dixon Line. At the Convention meeting in Louisville last month one of our ministers said, "The North, with 50 to 60 million committed to no church, is our Twentieth Century frontier, and we are a frontier religion". Statistics have been thrown at us with careless disregard for their credibility. The rank and file of Southern Baptists believe that the north is one vast territory of spiritual destitution. What are the facts? So far as I know, there has been only one dependable nation-wide religious survey made and that was done by the National of Churches in a series of studies published in 1957 and 1958. The percentage of the population in the major metropolitan areas who are identified with some church turns out to be very interesting. For example: In Charleston, W. Va., 28% of the population belong to some church, and in Canton, Ohio, 50.2%; Austin, Texas, has 45.1% and Des Moines, Iowa, 44.2%; Greenville, South Carolina, has 51.4% and Green Bay, Wisconsin, has 83.2%; Denver, Colorado, has 41.6% and Dallas, Texas, has 49.6%; Chicago, Illinois, has 57.3% and Atlanta, Georgia, has 45.4%; San Francisco, California, has 40.3% and Memphis, Tennessee, has 36.2%; and, to bring this monotonous statistical merry-go-round to a stop, the largest city in the north, New York City, has 61.5% and the largest city in the south, Houston, Texas, has 57.3%.

These statistics mean only one thing: no part of the United States can be singled out as an area of peculiar spiritual destitution. Oregon and Wisconsin are definitely heathen; as heathen, almost, as Arkansas and Texas.

OUR ECUMENICAL FEARS

Another reason given for expansion is the fact that the American Baptist Convention has ecumenical connections which the Southern Convention does not have and of which it is suspicious. In the mind of the average Southern Baptist "ecumenical" is a nasty word and anything connected with it is suspect. This highly emotionalized prejudice is the result of misrepresentations and half-truths which have been spoken or written about the movement. Most of our people, including our pastors, have never had any ecumenical experiences of any kind. Councils of Churches are to them symbols of atheism, modernism, formalism and total regimentation. No movement in modern history has been so completely misrepresented and misunderstood as has the ecumenical movement. When, therefore, our people are told that American Baptists are affiliated with the National Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches, an emotional barrier is raised which is difficult to surmount.

Although this is the prevailing attitude, it is not universal. For example, Dr. E. S. James, Editor of the Texas Baptist Standard, which has a weekly circulation of 325,000, maintains that it would not be wise for Southern Baptists to become affiliated with any Council of Churches, but he has insisted repeatedly that when we speak or write of the Councils and of the ecumenical movement, we should tell the truth.

DOCTRINAL DEVIATION

The most powerful factor motivating our movement into the north is the belief, widely held among our people, that American Baptists are not doctrinally sound and that they are not preaching the Gospel. This is the most serious charge that could be made against a pastor, a church or a denomination. It is incredible that anyone should take it seriously, but many Southern Baptists do. It is not possible for an outsider to realize how profoundly our people are moved to action when they believe that great masses of people have no opportunity to hear the Gospel, not even from their pastors and churches. Every Southern pastor who has had any friendly personal relations with American Baptist churches knows that this accusation is preposterous and absurd. But very few Southern Baptist pastors have had such experiences.

These are some of the reasons which motivate us in our movement into the north and by which we, in turn, justify ourselves in doing it. But are these the real reasons? Frequently one hears a Southern Baptist say, "They do not understand us" - "they" meaning, of course, American Baptists. This is partly true. But do we understand ourselves? The springs of our actions lie much deeper than the surface explanations which we often give to ourselves. A real searching at the depth is going on among some of our most discerning leaders, and I am convinced that it is in this area and at this level that we shall really understand what is happening in Southern Baptist life.

PROGRAMATIC UNDERSTANDING OF OURSELVES

Dr. Ramsey Pollard, newly elected president of the Southern Baptist Convention, in an interview immediately after his election, was asked to give his opinion of the "invasion". He said, "The name, Southern Baptist Convention, carries with it more than a geographical meaning. It has a doctrinal and functional meaning". In that word, "functional", he has given the clue to our motives and acts. We have a programmatic understanding of our existence, which affects all of our denominational motivation and behavior.

It affects our theology, for it leads us to make the quite unbiblical identification of the church with the institution. The church, therefore, becomes something that can be created, identified, located, promoted and disposed of by men. The program of the institution is the work of the Holy Spirit. Individuals who are brought into the church, by whatever method, are drawn by the Holy Spirit into this relationship because the program of the institution is the work of Christ.

This programmatic understanding of our existence determines our relationship with other Christians and other Christian bodies. It disfranchises them, even those of "like faith and order", because they express their faith and life through other ecclesiastical institutions and forms. In effect, we interpret ourselves as a "denomination" of Christians distinct from other Baptists, and not as one convention among several, all belonging to a single denomination. This conception lies at the heart of the "invasion". Understanding our existence in this fashion, it is natural and inevitable that we should have no hesitancy in establishing churches in direct competition with American Baptist churches.

This programmatic understanding of our existence profoundly affects and actually determines our theological emphases. Theology is the clue to the invasion. Our theological understanding of ourselves motivates and justifies it. The theological deviations to which we object and which we condemn in other Baptists, are not those with which the Bible primarily deals - the nature of God, the nature and meaning of the church, the person of Christ, man's state before God, the meaning of the cross and an understanding of history - but trivial matters on which the Bible hardly speaks at all - alien immersion, close communion and the like. Even these quasi-theological issues with which we are concerned have a direct connection with our program of winning and receiving members and of building a closely knit ecclesiastical fellowship.

Within our fellowship theological issues are not very important. Where an honest discussion of them might endanger institutional harmony they are avoided as the plague. Pastors are approved or condemned in terms of their willingness or unwillingness to cooperate with the program. Institution and agency officials are chosen primarily because of their understanding of the machinery of these ecclesiastical institutions and not because of their theological clarity and Biblical understanding. There are, of course, exceptions to this, but they are few.

Finally, this programatic understanding of our existence profoundly affects our ethics. A careful study of our promotional material will disclose, I believe, that the governing principle is, What will most effectively promote our work? Our methods are not evaluated theologically, but pragmatically. Evangelistic methods are recommended or rejected on the basis of whether or not they produce quantitative results. The same can be said for the methods which we use in promoting all phases of our work. We easily adopt the successful methods of money-raisers and advertising agencies without subjecting them to sound theological evaluation.

Many of our American Baptist friends are amazed and bewildered at the unethical practices which sometimes have accompanied the "invasion". Unsuspecting people are told that American Baptists are not Christians, and that they do not preach the Gospel; members are persuaded to leave their churches and join Southern Baptist churches in the same community; churches are located very near American Baptist churches; in some instances members coming from American Baptist churches are required to be re-batized. But why should you be amazed? These methods produce results, and any kind of unethical behavior can be justified on the programatic basis, provided it does not violate generally accepted behavior patterns.

These are hard words, and, believe me, they are not spoken without agony. I do not speak as an isolated individual, out of step with his brethren and coming north to get something off his chest. Thousands of Southern Baptist ministers, scholars, denominational officials and laymen are deeply concerned. Often they are in positions of grave responsibility and cannot speak frankly, except in private conversation. These men and women are agonizing because they know that the judgment of God rests heavily upon us. They want reconciliation with their American brethren, but they know that it cannot come by smooth words or by dodging basic issues. Again and again they said or wrote to me before I came to this meeting: "Do not excuse our sins or justify our wrong-doing". The word of God's judgment is heavy upon our hearts. We know that we cannot escape His wrath by calling attention to impressive institutional statistics and saying, "Lord, have we not done many marvelous works?" while at the same time we say to those who are bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh in Christ, "We have no need of you". I come to you sharing the agony of men and women whom I know and love. We come not with soft words and pleasing generalities, but with penitence, saying, "God, be merciful to us sinners".

And how fares it with you? Can you in all sincerity stand in the presence of the Judge of men and nations and conventions, and say, "I thank Thee, O Lord, that I am not like other men, or even these Southern Baptists"? Can you? It is not for me to say. No man can repent for another, and no fellowship can pronounce the judgment of God upon another. But consider:

Thousands of our people - most of them simple, plain, poor people - have gone north to better their condition. They have not felt that they were wanted in the churches where they have gone. They found it very hard to sing the Lord's song in a strange land. Have you really helped them to learn to sing it with you? Have you really cared whether they sang it or not? They are simple people to whom forms and ceremonies are as strange as a foreign tongue, but they love the Lord. Have you been willing to gather with them in their homes or perhaps in a crude store-front building and join with them in singing, "Bringing in the Sheaves", just because you love them in Christ? Have you?

They are a proud people, too proud, perhaps for their own good. But it is a part of them, like their hands and feet. I have known southern Christians who were so poor that they could not buy shoes for their children but who refused to accept charity. They came north to better their condition, not to lose their dignity. In their church life they do not want people to do something for them but to do something worthwhile with them. Participation is the bloodstream of their devotion. Have you hunted them out and encouraged them to contribute their own gifts of grace for the enrichment of your fellowship? They have something to contribute; but they must be encouraged to make it in their own way. They may begin by saying, "I want to tell you-all what Christ means to me". But when they have finished your hearts will be strangely warmed. They are strangers in a strange land, frightened and unsure of their ability to cope with the new situation. Have you swept the house diligently until you found them? And when you found them, did you really want them?

Thousands of intelligent, well-to-do Southern Baptists have gone north with the full intention of uniting with American churches, but they have not found what they were looking for. Let me give one illustration. A young business man, active in the life of our convention, vice-president of the Foreign Mission Board, was transferred by his company to the east. I have his permission to quote a part of his letter to me:

"When I was in the south and active in the Southern Baptist Convention, I thought it was wrong for Southern Baptists to invade the territory of the American Baptists ... In fact, I was indignant and quite vocal in my disapproval.

"When we moved into the territory of the American Baptist Convention we had no thought of joining any church but a Baptist church ... Our first Sunday here we visited the nearest Baptist church. On subsequent Sundays we visited other Baptist churches. Having small children, we investigated their educational programs ... To put it mildly, we were terribly disappointed ... After much soul-searching and great travail, we joined a Congregational church."

Does this trouble you, or do you pass it off as the normal behavior of a narrow-minded Southern Baptist? But they are not narrow-minded. His wife is now an officer of the Council of Churches in their city.

Tens of thousands of American Baptists have moved south for the same reasons that Southern Baptists have moved north. They find it as difficult to be at home in our churches as Southerners do in yours. Thousands of those capable, dedicated people are lost to our Baptist fellowship every year. Do you not have a responsibility for them?

Your answer to these questions must be, not to Southern Baptists, but to God.

Do we not all stand under judgment? Have we not all participated in the creation of a situation which now imperils our Baptist fellowship all over the world? Can we not all join with one voice, saying, "God be merciful! Christ have mercy!"?

WHERE GRACE APPEARS

If so, then His mercy is at hand. For where judgment leads to repentance, there His grace calls forth faith and bestows His gifts of love and peace. We have sinned, but where our sins abound, His grace much more abounds. There are places in our Southern Baptist life where the healing works of grace now appear. I mention three of them.

For one thing, there is a deep uneasiness among Southern Baptists about the emphasis which we are placing on the mechanics of our witness. Wherever you go in the South you find Baptist pastors who are unhappy about this situation. They resent the pressures that are forcing them to spend more time promoting the denominational program than in doing their work of prayer, Bible study, preaching and pastoral care. They resent the mechanical standards by which their work is measured. Dr. James E. Tull of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, in an article in the current issue of the Baptist Program entitled, Responsible Denominationalism, expresses this impatience with great clarity. The far-reaching effect of this one article cannot be estimated, for the Baptist Program is sent to every pastor in the Southern Convention. I quote one paragraph from the article:

"When the structural pre-empts the place of the spiritual, a materialization of the faith results. The spiritual content of the Gospel becomes a possession which can be assessed by statistical analysis and quantitative measurements. Missionary thrust is gauged by the number of conversions; Christian nurture is gauged by the number who attend church school; Christian piety is gauged by the number who attend the preaching services and prayer meeting; Christian stewardship is gauged by the size of the budget; Christian efficiency is gauged by whether one technique is used, in preference to another. And the criterion for the selection of one technique over another is whether it produces a more impressive statistical result. The spiritual content of the gospel thus becomes a commodity which can be distributed and

promoted. The gospel can be 'spread' just as though it were salad dressing or peanut butter."

Hundreds of Southern pastors will raise an hearty "Amen" to every word the Dr. Tull has written. This is a work of Grace!

A second area in which God's grace is at work is in the attitudes of our responsible boards and agencies. The Home Mission Board has been severely criticized because of its part in the expansion. Some of this criticism is justified. But a part of it is the result of failure to understand the very difficult situation in which the Board is placed. State conventions and local churches are as free to expand their work as the Home Mission Board is. State conventions have paid the moving expenses of preachers into new territories and in some instances have paid their salaries. Local churches help to finance "pioneer" churches. Dr. Courts Redford, Secretary of the Home Mission Board, informs me that it is not the policy of the Board to help in the support of a pastor, or in the construction of buildings, or in the purchase of a site in any area in which there is another Baptist church of any kind serving that immediate community. He makes it very clear that this is the policy of the Board and he personally asks me to assure you that the policy will be implemented as fully and consistently as possible. It is possible that local churches and state conventions more and more will turn to the Home Mission Board for guidance and advice in their support of new churches. If they do, this Board will be able to discourage competition and help build understanding and cooperation. Fewer and fewer free-lance ministers will be able to promote churches under the pretext of being responsible Southern Baptists doing recognized Southern Baptist work. I would suggest that wherever a work is established or promoted in any place or any manner that would embarrass or weaken American Baptist work, the attention of the Home Mission Board should be called to it immediately. Lines of communication should be kept open between state and national denominational officials on both sides. The unpleasant things which have happened are an embarrassment to our leaders and I am assured that they are anxious to establish structures and procedures for cooperation as soon as possible. We have gone a long way since 1940, and I hope that American Baptists will explore the new opportunities for cooperation which this changed attitude makes possible. This is a work of grace.

Finally, God's grace is obviously and powerfully at work among all of our North American conventions as we move together toward our climactic Jubilee Advance Celebration in Atlantic City in May, 1964. The Joint Committee on Baptist Jubilee Advance is composed of trusted and dedicated representatives of the major Baptist conventions on this continent. Through the courtesy of Dr. C. C. Warren I have had the privilege of reading the minutes of their meetings, and I must confess that I have been deeply impressed by their prayerful determination to bridge the gaps that separate us and to heal the wounds that have been made by unwise unilateral activity. Irritations, tensions and misunderstandings have been frankly and honestly shared by the Joint Committee in a spirit of humility and love. On February 28, 1958, they drew up a Statement on Baptist Relationships which, if it were widely circulated in all of our conventions, would lift our relationships to a new level. To be truly appreciated, the entire statement should be read. I have time to quote only a few sentences: "In this Baptist Jubilee Advance each cooperating unit desires and prays for the strengthening and advance of brother Baptists of other bodies and areas. None desires to grow at the expense of the others, none believes it has a right to say to another, 'We must increase and you must decrease'... Each will strive for the enlargement of its particular fellowship in the faith. But this spirit-prompted ambition will not tolerate scorn of any brethren nor that type of rivalry which flouts the principles of brotherhood in order to resort to tactics of predatory warfare..."

Our conversation here today is occasioned by the behavior of Baptists at their worst. The Baptist Jubilee Advance is a call for Baptists to behave at their best. I have faith that Southern Baptists can respond to that high challenge. This is a Baptist Advance, not merely a Southern Baptist Advance. Men rise above petty trifles when they are challenged by great events and great causes.

One phase of the Baptist Jubilee Advance which is sponsored by the Southern Convention is the 30,000 movement. This movement is challenging Southern Baptists as nothing else has in the last 25 years. Let me make it very clear that the objective is not to establish 30,000 Southern Baptist churches in the United States or on the North American continent. Dr. C. C. Warren, former president of the Southern Baptist Convention, and Director of the 30,000 movement, has repeatedly insisted that the objective is to encourage Baptists to establish

10,000 new churches and 20,000 new missions, at home and abroad. By missions he means Sunday schools and preaching points, most of which would be located in places where no church would ever be established. I can assure you that it is not the intention of the Director of the 30,000 movement or any agency of our convention to use the Jubilee Advance as an incentive to invade any territory. It is not their intention to establish 10,000 Southern Baptist churches and 20,000 Southern Baptist mission points. We sincerely hope that this Advance can be an harmonious, cooperative venture in which all of us share, that it may be to the glory of God and not to any particular branch of our fellowship. Whether or not the masses of Southern Baptists share the convictions of Dr. Warren, I do not know. One thing I do know: It is the responsibility of all of us who do share his convictions to strengthen his arm.

For the first time since the tragic days of the War Between the States, Baptists of this nation have an opportunity and challenge to act in concert for a cause that involves the welfare of all of us. Heretofore most of our efforts toward reconciliation have been at the institutional and geographical levels. The Baptist Jubilee Advance gives us an opportunity to attack this problem at another level - the level of the spirit. Only if my heart is as thy heart can I sincerely offer thee my hand. If a truly Christian spirit prevails among us, structures of cooperation, from the local community all the way up to the convention level, can be devised without difficulty. Southern Baptists are taking the Jubilee seriously. It will give many of us our first opportunity to participate in any meaningful endeavor beyond the scope of our convention interests. Many of our leaders see this as our first opportunity really to experience mutual understanding, appreciation and Christian charity. There is no guarantee that our people will walk across that bridge. Sectional rivalry and institutional idolatry may blind us to this opportunity which grace offers. But there is a fighting chance! And my plea is that we bring to this task of building understanding and respect the same all-out devotion, zeal and sacrifice that any of us can possibly bring to the building of our institutional, programatic structures. More important than establishing 10,000 new churches is the task of creating 10,000 communities where Baptists are dedicated to build centers of appreciation, respect, charity and cooperation.

We are separate conventions and associations within one large Baptist family. If that fact ever captures our minds and hearts, then our traditional Baptist witness will experience a new birth of freedom and power.

#