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Darkness to Light

A Christian Historian
Looks at Christmas

By James Lee Young
for Baptist Press

"Crispus the Christian stood on a balcony and shuddered at the sights and sounds of wild revelry echoing through the streets and courtyards of Rome.

"The Festival of Saturnalia (Dec. 17-24) was in its final day of merrymaking. It was 300 years since the star had led the Magi to where the Christ Child was in Judea.

"Activities not openly permitted even in Rome were openly engaged in during this season. Crispus found the reckless celebration so revolting that he tried to stay at home until the week of orgy had ended.

"The following day--Dec. 25--was Brumhalia, the birthday of the sun, when the festivities and rioting reached a peak."

Crispus is fictional, representative of Christians in Rome about 300 A.D., but the man telling the story is real.

William A. Carleton, dean and professor of church history, emeritus, of Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary, Mill Valley, Calif., leaned back in his chair and peered from behind a stack of books on the history of Christmas.

His eyes twinkled with the excitement of undertaking another of many historical journeys he has charted in 49 years as a Christian educator, author, pastor, denominational leader and historian.

Crispus, had he been a real person, probably wouldn't have celebrated the birth date of Jesus Christ, Carleton said. In all probability, December 25 wasn't the date Jesus was born, the professor said.

He continued, "Christians then had an aversion to celebrating either the birth of Jesus or joining in the existing pagan traditions and rituals surrounding the December 25 celebration of the 'time when the sun began to conquer the darkness.'"

Carleton said various religions and cultures selected December 25 as a festival day when they noticed the days getting shorter and the nights longer.

"They began to imagine that the sun was being defeated and, doubtless, began to fear that there might eventually be no sunrise.

"Then, between December 22-25, people began to see that the sun was holding its own in the battle against darkness and recognized those days as the 'time when the sun had begun to win its fight,'" Carleton said.

"That's the reason December 25 was celebrated among the Druids of England, the Teutonic tribes in Germany and the pagans of what are now the Scandanavian countries."

Carleton said early Christians thought it would dishonor Jesus to celebrate His birthday. He cited a statement by Origen, a great Christian leader in Alexandria, Egypt, in the year 245 A.D., who said it was disgraceful to think of celebrating Jesus' birthday as if He were a pharaoh or king.

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"It would have been the same as saying to the early Christians that Jesus had just come into existence, rather than having existed from the beginning of time," Carleton said.

"God was thought of as an eternal being, so it's a little odd that with this opposition from even Christian leaders in the early days Christmas has still become the most popular Christian holiday," said Carleton.

It was a day that didn't really come to be observed until the latter part of the fourth century, he noted.

December 25 is just one of several days men have chosen through the centuries to celebrate Jesus' birth date. For hundreds of years, there was no agreement as to the correct day of Jesus' birth. Differences on the issue still exist today, said Carleton. Early writers mentioned January 6, March 25, April 18, May 20 and November 17, he said.

Pagan traditions, such as Christmas trees, mistletoe and the exchanging of presents, were adapted into the Christian observance which evolved into the most popular holiday of modern times.

Centuries after the birth of Jesus, when the Puritans gained power in England, it was against the law to observe Christmas. The day was deemed a "heathen practice" or a concession to the Roman papacy, to which the Puritans were opposed, Carleton said.

"The Puritans said Christ wouldn't have approved of celebrating such a day and ordered everyone to work, as on other days." Shops remained open on Christmas Day, and no one was allowed to light candles, or eat holiday cakes, he continued.

In many towns in England, town criers proclaimed government edicts, shouting, "No Christmas, No Christmas."

Christmas was finally restored as a holiday in England when the Puritans lost their power and the Church of England was restored.

Even the early Americans were slow to accept Christmas, Carleton said.

"It's surprising to find that the famous pilgrims of the Mayflower and Plymouth Rock fame were very much against observing Christmas. On their first Christmas in the New World, they said there wasn't going to be any of this celebration or merriment. Instead, they began to construct the first house 'for common use to receive them and their goods' on December 25."

In spite of opposition from some early American Christians, there were denominations that didn't share the negative feelings about celebrating the birthday of Jesus, Carleton said.

James H. Barnett in his book, The American Christmas: A Study in National Culture, quoted the New York Daily Times of Dec. 26, 1855: "The churches of the Presbyterians, Baptists and Methodists were not open on December 25...but Episcopalian, Catholic and German churches were all open. Inside they were decked with evergreens.

Most states had accepted the day as a legal holiday by the mid-1800s, Carleton added.

Few people today--particularly few Christian groups--oppose Christmas as a celebration, except where the concept of Jesus having come to earth as God conflicts with other religious ideas, Carleton said. Some Christians still see the celebration as pagan, he said.

The power of Jesus Christ to transform the ugly and sordid into something lovely was demonstrated in the transformation of the season into the Christmas celebration, he continued.

Finally, although commercialism too often dominates Christmas, the celebration emphasizes peace, benevolence and generosity, Carleton said. "People give presents at Christmas who are normally so stingy they wouldn't give at any other time of the year.

"I think it's a response to the message of Christmas, that God gave His all in His son, Jesus Christ.

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December 5, 1973

Home Mission Board Names
22 New Mission Personnel

ATLANTA (BP)--The board of directors of the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board has appointed eight missionaries and 14 missionary associates at the annual fall board meeting here.

Among those appointed to full missionary status were Texas natives, Jackie and Sue Heath. They will serve in Garden City, Kan., where Heath will be superintendent of missions.

Heath, a native of Big Spring, Tex., received his bachelor of arts degree from Hardin Simmons University in Abilene, Tex., and his bachelor of divinity degree from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth.

Mrs. Heath, the former Ella Sue Thomas of Hereford, Tex., attended Ranger Junior College in Ranger, Tex.

Herbert and Peggy Slaughter were also appointed to missionary status. They will live in South Charleston, W. Va., where he is superintendent of missions.

A Todd County, Ky., native, Slaughter received his bachelor of arts degree from Belmont College in Nashville, Tenn., and his master of divinity from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville.

Mrs. Slaughter, the former Peggy Marie Pulley, is a native of Nashville.

Missionary appointees to Flint, Mich., are Billy and Louise Chambers. He was appointed superintendent of missions. They both are natives of Fort Worth.

Chambers received his bachelor of arts degree from Baylor University in Waco, Tex., and his bachelor of divinity degree from Southwestern Seminary.

Mrs. Chambers, the former Ima Louise Tyson, received her bachelor of science degree from Texas Wesleyan College, Fort Worth.

Kenneth and Marilyn Prickett have been promoted from missionary associates to career missionaries. Prickett will serve as a field worker in Santa Fe, N. M.

A Guymon, Okla., native, Prickett received his bachelor of music degree from Wichita State University in Wichita, Kan.

Mrs. Prickett, the former Marilyn Nelson of Amarillo, Tex., received her bachelor of science degree from Texas Tech University in Lubbock.

Newly appointed missionary associates serving in Texas are Paul and Margarita Pequeno. Pequeno is the pastor of the Mexican Baptist Mission in Slaton.

Also serving in Texas are newly appointed missionary associates Henry and Candelania Rosales. Rosales is pastor of the Bethel Baptist Mission in Corpus Christi.

Juan and Nora Couso were also appointed missionary associates. He is pastor of the Buenas Nuevas Baptist Church in Miami, Fla.

Kenneth Hudson and Linda Casper were appointed missionary associates and student interns. They both attend Southwestern Seminary.

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Also named as missionary associates were James and Marcel DuBose. DuBose, pastor of the Sunset Hill Baptist Church, Kansas City, Mo., also attends Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary there.

Raul and Clara Cabellero were also among the 14 newly appointed missionary associates. Cabellero is the pastor of the Macedonia Baptist Church, Nixon, Tex.

Another Texas couple appointed as missionary associates were Ricardo and Enedelia Hernandez. He is pastor of the Primera Iglesia Bautista, Mineral, Tex.

The Cabelleros and the Hernandezes both attend the Mexican Baptist Bible Institute, San Antonio, Tex.

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Mission Board Reorganizes Evangelism Division 12/5/73

ATLANTA (BP)--Directors of the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board have approved a realignment of the board's evangelism division into three departments--lay witness ministries, mass evangelism ministries and evangelism materials and services.

C. B. Hogue, the division's new director, outlined the reorganization at a three-day conference here on evangelism strategies attended by some 55 state-level Southern Baptist evangelism leaders.

Hogue said the new system will place three department directors in charge of the three areas of work and replace the old system of one division director and a staff of associate directors. Hogue will supervise the three directors.

The new organizational plan will place men together who have affinity relationships, Hogue said.

"It should give us stronger impact and a stronger working relationship with groups coming to the division for assistance," he said.

W. D. Lawes, now an associate director, will become assistant to the director of the division in the organization.

John Havlik, now an associate director for publications and materials, will direct the department of evangelism materials and services under the new plan, and Jack Stanton, now an associate director for lay witnessing, will be director of the department of mass evangelism ministries.

The director of the department of lay witness materials has yet to be named, although that department will include Reid Hardin, now an associate director, as director of renewal evangelism, and Barry St. Clair, also now an associate director, as director of youth evangelism.

Hogue, who succeeded Kenneth Chafin as director of the division of evangelism in July, said the reorganization does not mean the division necessarily will expand.

He does have plans, however, to replace two staff members--Nathan Porter, who resigned earlie in the year as associate director for student evangelism, and William Powell, who resigned as associate director for bus evangelism.

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Bond Association Tops $50 Million Mark 12/5/73

ST. LOUIS (BP)--The Association of Baptist State Convention Church Bond Plans, meeting here, announced that the 10 Southern Baptist state conventions in its membership have passed the $50 million mark in bonds issued to churches within the conventions.

More than $20 million of that amount has been issued by the Illinois convention, according to Arthur Farmer, director of special ministries for the Illinois convention.

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Association president, Arthur Stainback, director of church planning, building and financing services for the Missouri Baptist Convention, said the association hopes to cooperate with the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board's newly-approved church bond corporation.

He said the association was organized in 1972 to assist churches to build, plan and finance and avoid legal and financial pitfalls which would damage their integrity and their giving to the Southern Baptist Cooperative Program unified budget.

Participating state conventions, besides Illinois and Missouri,are Alaska, Florida, Indiana, Maryland, Michigan, New Mexico, Northwest and Ohio.

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Home Mission Board Names 12/5/73
Black Department Head

ATLANTA (BP)--The Southern Baptist Home Mission Board has named its first black department head, elected a woman staff member, elevated an office worker to a staff position and accepted the resignation of another staff member.

Emmanuel McCall, associate in the department of cooperative ministries with National (black) Baptists, was designated director-elect of the department for the next year preceeding the retirement of Victor Glass, current department head.

Now both of the Home Mission Board departments which deal with ethnic groups have ethnic heads. The other is Oscar Romo, a Mexican-American, who has headed the language missions department since 1971.

Elaine Selcraig Furlow was named editor of book publication services. Her job includes production of the Home Mission Graded Series and administration of the board's library.

Harold Culbreath was elevated to a staff position, from supervisor of auxiliary services to director of auxiliary services. Culbreath directs operation of the board's offset printing, shipping department, mailroom and tract inventory and mailout services.

Elias Golonka resigned as associate in the language missions department but will continue to be available to the board for consultation with its European language people and internationals. Golonka has served in the department since 1965 as assistant secretary and earlier as general field representative for two years.

McCall has served as associate in the department of cooperative ministries with National Baptists since 1968. Before that he was pastor of 28th Street Baptist Church in Louisville and was formerly professor at Simmons University, also in Louisville.

A native of Sharon, Pa., McCall holds a bachelor of arts degree from the University of Louisville and master of divinity and master of religious education degrees from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville.

While McCall is the Home Mission Board's first black department head, the first black staff member was Roland Smith who served in 1944 as field secretary of Negro work. In 1945, Smith was named assistant to the executive secretary of the Home Mission Board for Negro work, working out of an office at his Atlanta home.

Mrs. Furlow will move from her position as managing editor of an employee publication of Irving Trust Company in New York. She received her undergraduate degree in journalism from Baylor University, Waco, Tex., and a master of arts degree in journalism from the University of Missouri at Columbia. She is a former assistant editor at the Southern Baptist Brotherhood Commission, Memphis, and is married to Robert Furlow, a reporter for the Atlanta Bureau of the Associated Press.

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