



BAPTIST PRESS

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October 28, 1980

80-172

Institutionalization Dangerous Says Lay Renewal Specialist

TOCCOA, Ga. (BP)--One of the deadliest dangers facing experiential faith today is that Southern Baptist churches are too religious, according to a Southern Baptist religious educator and renewal specialist.

Speaking to 400 participants at the week-long National Renewal Conference, Findley Edge, professor of religious education at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, warned that God will abandon Southern Baptists if "we become religious instead of becoming the people of God."

"Our churches today are filled with religious people," he said. "I must confess, though, I have some question how many of God's people we have there."

The problem, Edge contends, is in becoming institutionalized. "The danger of institutionalization is that as the essence of the movement is passed from one generation to the next, a part of the dynamics is lost and what is maintained are the forms," he said.

Southern Baptists may be close to losing the essence of the gospel, Edge warned. "How far along the cycle have we come?" he asked. "How much of the dynamics have we lost?"

"We are religious people," he said, "no question about that. We have magnificent churches, people giving money, beautiful buildings, people attending, tipping their hats to God, trying to be nice people, decent people in the community.

"But to what extent do we know and have we appropriated and are we expressing the dynamic of that which God is and that which he is seeking to communicate to the world through us?"

Edge suggested renewal in local churches could help abort Southern Baptists' cycle of institutionalization. He reminded that renewal is not a program but an attempt by a person to recapture the essence of the gospel and to have the gospel become real and deep in a personal experience and, hopefully, in the corporate life of the church.

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Persecution May Be Easing
On Mexican Baptist Families

Baptist Press
10/28/80

MEXICO CITY (BP)--Barricades keeping farm animals from water have been removed as the first sign that religious persecution of nine Baptist families may be easing in the town of Santa Maria del Monte, 45 miles west of Mexico City.

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However, municipal lights and water are still being denied the group, which has been the target of harassment by Roman Catholic townspeople since July, according to Southern Baptist press representative David Daniell.

Eldon Sturgeon, Southern Baptist representative in Mexico, also reports the Catholic priest accused by Baptists of arousing the trouble has himself been run out of town by those he incited.

Problems began when Baptists refused to contribute financially to the Catholic church as the priest demanded. Nine Mexican Baptists were hospitalized Aug. 3, after the congregation was attacked by a mob estimated at 10,000. Law enforcement officials refused to press charges against the offenders and authorities in Santa Maria del Monte have denied Baptists municipal lights and water since then.

According to Daniell, neither the Central Baptist Association, composed of churches in the Mexico City area, nor the National Baptist Convention of Mexico feels an appeal to the Archbishop of Mexico would be a proper approach. The groups say they believe it would only place the Baptists in a posture of begging. An attorney for the Mexico convention, Pedro Alcantara, has quoted an assistant to the Bishop of Toluca as saying the Baptists provoked the incident.

Meanwhile, churches of Central Association have donated more than \$2,800, as well as food and clothing, to aid the nine families. At least part of the money is expected to be used to construct a building where the group can worship, since they are afraid to gather in homes and the Mexican constitution prohibits worship in non-designated public places.

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'Return to Freedom' Story Of
Disillusionment and Discovery

Baptist Press
10/28/80

FORT WORTH, Texas (BP)--A "truth is stranger than fiction" drama of two disillusioned cult members who discovered Christ and Christian love will be presented nationally over the NBC television network, Nov. 23 at 5:00 p.m. EST.

"Return to Freedom," a one-hour special, is the story of Tommy and Hazel Whitfield--of their involvement in the Black Hebrew Cult, their escape from this cult with the aid of Southern Baptists and their acceptance of Christ as their savior. Whitfield is one of the original members of the rock group "Earth, Wind, and Fire."

The documentary was produced by NBC-TV in cooperation with the Southern Baptist Radio and Television Commission and was taped in Israel and the United States.

The Black Hebrew Cult is a group of approximately 3,000 Jewish people in Dimona, Israel, primarily black, who claim to be the rightful heirs to all of Israel. Led by Rabbi Ben Ami Carter, who calls himself a messiah, cult members have denounced their natural citizenship in most cases and transplanted themselves in Dimona. There they wait to become the rulers of the land they believe to be theirs by divine right.

The Whitfields, now living in the United States, were members of the Black Hebrew Cult for 12 years. In "Return to Freedom," they relate some of the experiences they and their seven children (two of whom died at the cult encampment in Israel) underwent while following Carter.

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The couple also describe the difficulty of escaping the cult and being accepted back into the United States after they had denounced their American citizenship to follow Carter to Israel.

"The documentary is a sensitive and moving portrayal of the power of Christian faith and love," said Radio and Television Commission President Jimmy R. Allen.

"Even with the Guyana tragedy still fresh in our memories, it's hard for many of us to realize that cults like the Black Hebrews really exist. One purpose of 'Return to Freedom' is to show how normal people can be taken in by cults. It's also a story of Christian devotion and redemption on the part of both the Whitfields and the many Baptists who were responsible for their return to this country."

Allen learned about the Whitfields while president of the Southern Baptist Convention. Through negotiations with the U.S. government he helped obtain permission for their readmittance into this country.

"Israel didn't want them and the United States refused to take them back—they had nowhere to go," Allen explained. "So they turned to missionaries at the Baptist Village in Petah-Tikva, Israel. The missionaries listened to the Whitfield's story and promised to help them."

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Physical Fitness Emphasized
At Senior Adult Chautauquas

By Gail Rothwell

Baptist Press
10/28/80

RIDGECREST, N.C. (BP)--"Your health is the most important thing you have," a physical fitness specialist told more than 850 participants at a five-day senior adult conference at Ridgecrest Baptist Conference Center.

Dick Couey, author of "Lifelong Fitness and Fulfillment for Senior Adults" and associate professor of health and physical education at Baylor University, said "You have a responsibility to glorify God in your body."

"Senior adults can see how their bodies are deteriorating and are more dedicated to physical fitness than a lot of young adults," said Couey, a former professional baseball player. "I try to point out how important the body is and that it is a sin not to take care of yourself. I try to reach senior adults through their intelligence, then get them to change their behavior."

Couey believes a lot of senior adults do not have a regular program of exercise because they are afraid of having a heart attack. "But actually exercise will improve the heart muscle, just like any other muscle in the body," he said. He explained that the highest percentage of heart attacks occur in men age 35-40. Couey emphasized a need for all people to cut down on their sugar intake and cautioned everyone to be careful of the foods they eat.

He stressed the importance of senior adults gaining medical clearance before beginning any exercise program. He suggested a beginning program of walking, progressing slowly, remaining consistent and never over-exerting. "Remember, you have the rest of your life to get in shape," he warned.

Couey, who accepts about 150 outside speaking engagements each year, says the most rewarding part of his work is "the letters I receive from people telling me how their lives have been changed by a regular program of fitness."

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He stressed that age should never be a barrier to physical fitness. "You are never too young or too old to exercise," he said. "Two weeks ago I was at a Chautauqua at Glorieta. One afternoon I jogged six miles with a 91-year-old man who had been running all his life."

In addition to the spiritual reasons for keeping fit, Couey said exercise improves one's self-image, physiological efficiency, and "helps you to think better, because when you exercise you produce more red blood cells which carry oxygen to the brain."

Couey holds degrees in chemistry, biology and physiology.

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(BP) photo mailed to state Baptist newspapers by Sunday School Board bureau of Baptist Press.

White Flight Gives Birth
To New Orleans Phoenix

By Patti Stephenson

Baptist Press
10/28/80

NEW ORLEANS (BP)—On Sunday morning, walking through the halls of Franklin Community Baptist Mission, there's a feeling that the church is a size too large for its congregation.

"Most churches need a place to fit their people," says Billy Weathers, pastor of this fledgling flock. "We need the people to fit the place."

Instead of despairing at this pronouncement, Weathers' voice is tinged with satisfaction. Surveying the spacious sanctuary with a permanent half-smile fixed above his black beard, he is witnessing week by week the rebirth of a church that was committing slow suicide.

The demise of Franklin Avenue Baptist Church was predictable. Resisting the influx of blacks into the community and the congregation as the white membership trickled away, the church withered from inside. Hoping to salvage the only Southern Baptist witness in this Eighth Ward district, the Baptist Association of Greater New Orleans advised the church to change direction with a black pastor.

Weathers, a student at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, took the job.

On Dec. 2, 1979, the church held a "transitional meeting" with both charter members from Franklin Avenue and a handful of mission newcomers partaking in a joint Lord's Supper. Beginning with nine people, the mission's enrollment has grown to 36.

Most of the adults are seminary students who have joined to fill leadership slots. The challenge, as Weathers sees it, is to entice neighborhood adults into the fellowship and then cultivate them as leaders.

Each Sunday, blacks in Sunday clothes cluster at the bus stop across the street. Most travel long distances to black churches where they grew up. Weathers says a few have visited the mission, "but they say I preach like a white man," he concedes.

A remnant of the former community around the church consists of Catholics too old to follow the white exodus. Weathers is having some success in reaching them through homebound Bible study.

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Before Sunday school each week, Weathers and his teachers meet to pray and then scatter to classrooms.

In the preschool department, one four-year-old boy has the place to himself. His teachers, Mark and Phyllis Sperry, are seminary students. Phyllis conducts a tour of the empty department, pointing out half a dozen empty baby beds; "At least we'll have these when we need them."

Nearby the adult teacher, Jim Shoopman, faces an empty classroom.

"Sunday School is traditionally for children in the black churches, so we're trying to get our adults in the habit of coming," he explains. He looks around the circle of empty chairs and admits, "It's going to take some time."

By the time the worship service begins six cars occupy the grassy parking lot. But most belong to the seminary students, many of the black women and children inside have walked from home.

The service is a blend of white and black worship traditions. When Weathers invites several volunteers to give their testimonies, a young black man steps forward. He grips the pulpit and reveals that he has just been released from prison where "the good Lord opened my eyes." A petite woman wearing a lace cap says she has been sick for many Sundays and is glad to be back in church. Each tale is accompanied by sympathetic murmuring and a frequent "praise God!"

Jim Shoopman observes; "One thing I've noticed here at this mission is that you people live and talk like Jesus is still alive. We had intended to join a larger church where we could coast for a while, but God led us here instead."

Weathers now walks his flock through the Lord's Supper and delivers a short sermon. Though his roots are steeped in the school of fiery, emotional preaching, his message is subtle and subdued. "Sometimes these folks are more interested in pathos than in learning," he suggests. "I like to leave them with something to chew on."

The congregation of less than 30 is stilled by his sincerity. During the third stanza of the invitation, a young woman steps forward to join the church as a new Christian, as does the man who just got out of jail.

Weathers goes home this Sunday immensely encouraged.

"When I first came to New Orleans, I thought it was another Sodom and Gomorrah," he confides. "But now God has placed in me a strong love for the people of New Orleans. I'm content to stay until he moves me."

Patti Stephenson is a newswriter for the Home Mission Board.

(BP) photo will be mailed to state Baptist newspapers by Atlanta bureau of Baptist Press.