



December 4, 1980

80-193

Move from Fanaticism to Faith
Rocky Road That Ends in Love

By Bonita Sparrow

FORT WORTH, Texas (BP)—For Hazel and Tommy Whitfield, the road from fanaticism to faith led through a landscape dotted with despair, disillusionment and dashed dreams.

They were caught up in a cult whose members follow a self-appointed messiah and believe they, instead of Israel's present citizens, are the actual chosen people of that "promised land."

At first they were as committed to their leader, Rabbi Ben Ammi Carter, as the members of the Guyana cult were committed to Jim Jones. They left their homes in Chicago for Israel where they expected to take over the land. They believed without question when they were told Ben Ammi was the messiah.

"Even when my mother died in Israel, I always felt someday Rabbi Ben Ammi would bring her back to life," Mrs. Whitfield says. "But when two of my children died, and I saw other people dying, I began to doubt."

Tommy, a musician who had played with B.B. King, James Brown, the Pharaohs, and with musicians who later formed Earth, Wind and Fire, and Hazel went to Israel in 1971. They joined members of the black Hebrew cult in a commune in Dimona, a city near the Negev Desert. In the next several years they renounced their American citizenship to keep the Israelis from deporting them, saw one of their children starve to death and another die of inadequate medical treatment, and themselves suffered great mental and physical harassment.

They have shared their story on an hour-long NBC-TV special produced in cooperation with the Southern Baptist Radio and Television Commission and on two commission radio programs, "Black Beat" and "MasterControl." They have written a book about their life in the cult, "From Night to Sunlight," by Broadman Press.

By renouncing their citizenship, the Whitfields lost their passports and their right to return to the United States. Disillusioned and "eaten up with bitterness" toward cult leaders, who were not living the sacrificial life they demanded of their followers, Whitfield was determined to show them he could make it on his own. On a friend's credit card, he ran up a tab of nearly \$28,000 for travel, clothes, food for the cult children, and to rent flashy automobiles.

The spending spree landed him in jail without bond on charges of conspiracy, forgery and criminal fraud. If convicted he faced years in prison. With a prison record, he could not hope to return to the United States.

Mrs. Whitfield, six months pregnant, was left alone on the streets of Tel Aviv with no money for her or her children. She begged for help and found none. Then a lawyer told her that missionaries at the Baptist Village in Petah Tikvah might help.

She called them only because there was no place else to turn. "It was Friday, the stores would close soon for Sabbath and I had no money for food, not even milk for the baby," she says. "We were sitting down to starve to death."

Then missionary Jim Burnham arrived, gave her \$20 for food and promised that members of his church would return the next day. They brought more food and clothing than Hazel Whitfield had seen in years.

"All I could do was stand there and cry," she says. "Here we had been living with flesh and blood members of our own family in a group that preached love and wouldn't lift a finger to keep us from starving. And these people who didn't even know us were helping. I had never in my life seen anything like that."

Mary Ann Burnham took Mrs. Whitfield to the jail to see Tommy. Mrs. Whitfield moved to the Baptist Village and her baby was born in the Baptist Hospital at Gaza.

The people at Baptist Village worked with the Whitfields on their immigration papers with special help from Jimmy Allen, president of the Radio and Television Commission, who was then president of the Southern Baptist Convention. His influence with both the Israeli and U. S. governments was instrumental in getting the Whitfields' immigration permission.

The Baptist Village missionaries also worked to get Whitfield out of jail on bail released into their custody. "But they mainly showed us how they felt about us," says Mrs. Whitfield. "I learned more about love than I had ever learned in my life. They didn't talk about love. They lived it. They were concerned about me, about my children. I couldn't turn away from it. I had no intention of accepting Christ, none. But I couldn't get away from all that love."

Whitfield, out of jail, was convinced it was all real when he and his wife saw their three-year-old son, who had been subjected to so much mistreatment in the cult that he had never talked, wrap his arms around Jim Burnham's knees and announce, "I love you."

"We wanted to be Christians, to be a part of that love," Whitfield said. It means a great deal to them that they were baptized in the Jordan River.

"How could we have been so taken in by the cult?" Mrs. Whitfield asked. "Ben Ammi Carter convinced us America was going to be destroyed and we should flee from its destruction. He said we were the chosen people of Israel. He promised we would all live together in love, we would be equal, and we would have an identity as people.

"That had never been said to us before. We wanted to live where we wouldn't have to worry about our kids being involved with drugs, or our daughter being molested walking down the street. It seemed like a haven."

But living conditions were poor. There were 25 to 30 people living in each two-bedroom apartment. There was no real hygiene, no privacy. The Whitfields got used to never being alone. They were not allowed to question anything. Because they didn't always behave as the cult leaders decreed, the Whitfields saw their marriage annulled, and their children cared for and punished by other people. Some cult children were beaten until they bled for such things as eating scraps from the table.

"I saw the cult leaders not living the songs they sang," he said. "People were starving and their tables were full. They were living well and we were supporting it. The leaders were using my music to draw others to them but when we did some of the things the leaders did, we'd be punished for it."

Today, thanks to miracles the couple relate directly to prayer, they are back in Chicago Heights. Whitfield is working at Stauffer Chemical, "not getting rich but not going hungry."

They are involved in Faith Tabernacle Baptist Church, where members practice the same kind of love found in the Baptist Village in Israel. Their pastor, Don Sharp, has just been elected a vice president of the Illinois Baptist Convention.

They're having a sunlight experience with Christ, but they are still concerned about family members remaining in the cult in Israel. "We want to let everybody know that God lives within us. That the Messiah has come and is in the hearts of his followers," Whitfield sums up.



BAPTIST PRESS

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Midland Church Tops Half Million To CP

MIDLAND, Texas (BP)—First Baptist Church of Midland, Texas, has become the first in the Southern Baptist Convention to contribute more than a half million dollars through the convention's Cooperative Program.

Its gifts of \$501,285 for the first 11 months of the year comprise approximately 1/69th of the \$34.6 million unified missions budget for 3,900 Texas Baptist churches. The church, with 4,000 resident members, also led the Southern Baptist Convention in Cooperative Program giving last year with contributions of \$410,000.

"I think our total amount is great but our people are not overly impressed and I don't think we have reached our full potential," said pastor Daniel Vestal.

"Midland is an economically healthy community in west Texas. We have been blessed with much, so in turn we share our blessings with others. Our giving is simply a matter of good stewardship," he said.

Vestal added that there is a tradition of generous mission giving in this church and a broad base of support. "I do not have to force my people to support the Cooperative Program or any other mission opportunities. Many families have been directly involved in mission work on the field and realize the tremendous financial needs necessary to carry out successful programs.

"I believe that if Southern Baptists are to become bold in missions throughout the world, then our churches are going to have to make radical commitments to the Cooperative Program and lay involvement.

"As people become personally involved then they are more willing to give sacrificially and joyfully," Vestal said.

First Baptist, Midland, earmarked 29 percent of its \$1.75 million budget during 1980 for the Cooperative Program and the 1981 budget of \$2.03 million calls for 30 percent to be given through the Cooperative Program.

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Cothen Urges Baptists
To Desert Partisanship

By Linda Lawson

Baptist Press
12/4/80

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP)--Grady C. Cothen sounded a ringing call for denominational unity, urging Southern Baptists "to desert partisanship and make the Holy Scripture our creed and the lost world our crusade."

"Southern Baptists are experiencing problems of a creative democracy," said Cothen, president of the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board.

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Adding that "some Baptists may be correct in their opinions that they have not been given an adequate voice in denominational decision-making," Cothen said: "Let us bring them in. We need them and they need us. It is not necessary to destroy those who disagree with us."

He said he believes current denominational controversies are symptomatic of a "fractious society" and a result of too many Christians "trying to do it on our own" instead of relying on God's direction.

"Let us not fall into the trap of denigrating other Christians," he said. "As Christ is ridiculed and the Bible is downgraded, so will we all be."

Addressing the annual meeting of state convention church program leaders, Cothen called for a new day of daring risk in planning, programming and personal lifestyle.

"These assaults upon our Christian faith have made us pull in our horns lest someone decapitate us," he said. "But it is not possible to steal second base with one foot on first."

He urged the leaders to understand and carry out their roll as ministering servants.

"The denomination, according to our polity, is our 35,000 churches. Our function is not to solve society's problems. Our function is not to instruct the churches. Our function is to serve the churches," he emphasized.

Cothen said activities planned by denominational agencies "must be an expression of the churches' purpose."

Bold Mission Thrust, the denomination's goal of sharing the gospel with every person by the year 2000, is an emphasis worthy of the consideration of every church, Cothen said.

"What began as a denominational slogan is becoming for all of us a guiding dream."

Bold Mission Thrust goals for 1982-85 will focus on three objectives: reaching people, developing believers, and strengthening families.

"These are objectives to which we can set our minds, turn our faces and give ourselves," Cothen said.

If Baptists draw together around Christ's commission to share the gospel, he noted, they will stand at a moment of opportunity such as they have not known before.

"Surely God wants to bless us. Let's get our hearts in such shape that he can, and then pray down the storm of his blessings."

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Hungarian Baptist Churches
Increase Building Programs

Baptist Press
12/4/80

BUDAFOK, Hungary (BP)--Hungarian Baptists are constructing new church buildings at a rate unparalleled in recent times, according to a Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board executive.

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After a tour of Baptist work in Hungary, J.D. Hughey, the board's director for Europe and the Middle East, said he was impressed by the vitality of the churches and the hospitality of the people.

The Hungarian government has given Baptists permission to build 20 churches, Hughey said. Many of them already are under construction.

"It is extremely important in communist countries to have buildings," he said, "because worship is allowed only in officially recognized places of worship."

Hughey said he preached in Budafok to approximately 150 people in an 80-year-old building that belonged to a German Baptist group before World War II. The congregation is renting the building from the government while constructing its own building with a seating capacity of 500-600, a short distance away.

The church has already spent \$100,000 on the project, all but \$4,000 coming from local funds, Hughey said. The completed building will cost \$250,000. Only two workers on the project are paid—the rest are volunteers from the predominantly young congregation. The money spent thus far on the building does not include that labor.

Often, funds have been depleted, but contributions on Sunday would enable them to continue building the next week. Many of the families give 20 to 30 percent of their income to the church, Hughey added.

The church, Hughey says, is typical of the churches in this Eastern Europe country which have building projects underway.

"Southern Baptists have each year, for a number of years, given a small amount to help with buildings," he said. "We have a great opportunity now to help Hungarian Baptists construct buildings that are needed and that have government authority."