



July 28, 1981

81-116

Smaw Offers His Life
For Death Row Men

By Norman Jameson

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP) — To Meredith Smaw, the wisp of smoke rising from the head of a man just jolted into death by 2300 volts of electricity signals an immoral act of retribution.

Smaw, a lobbyist in Nashville, Tenn., is so committed to abolishing the death penalty he has volunteered to be executed in place of any criminal.

To attorney John Southworth, death is a just, biblical punishment for grievous murders like that committed by Steven Judy, who raped and killed Terry Lee Chasteen and drowned her three children in a creek.

Southworth, who works for the Tennessee attorney general's office and is a seminary graduate, wishes the Bible did not condone the death penalty, but is convinced it does.

It would be unfair to say Smaw represents the thoughts of many Southern Baptists. And Southworth, a Presbyterian, is probably more reluctant than the majority of Southern Baptists to extract the ultimate penalty.

Southern Baptists have not spoken, as a convention, to capital punishment. The SBC Christian Life Commission, in its new Issues and Answers brochure, says Christians should "support the abolition of capital punishment."

The same call was shot down from the floor of the 1964 SBC meeting in Atlantic City when the last two paragraphs of such a recommendation were deleted from the commission's report... and it hasn't appeared since.

With his shock substitution offer, Smaw, a member of First Baptist Church, hopes to "stab the conscience of the nation broad awake."

"I am at war with the death penalty," he says. He joined battle, by announcing his offer, in June 1978, 18 months after Gary Gilmore became the first American executed in 10 years. There are 834 persons awaiting execution, though the status of their appeals means none likely will die before this fall.

"I realize that a time of real bloodletting is coming unless a drastic blow is taken to strike a death blow to the death penalty," Smaw told a Nashville newspaper. "Innocent blood will flow before the executions are stopped, I fear. Some person who has been wrongly condemned may be killed before his innocence is discovered. Or else the life of a substitute must be taken instead."

Izzy Zimmerman can appreciate that. In 1937, Zimmerman was two hours from electrocution when his sentence was commuted by the New York governor. He now seeks the right to sue the state for \$10 million as compensation for the 25 years he spent in prison for a crime he did not commit.

Criminologists estimate between two percent and six percent of the people in prison are innocent. "I said goodbye to 13 men on death row, and I'd say four of them were innocent," says Zimmerman.

For Christian abolitionists, the overriding concern is that Jesus taught redemption, not retribution. God through the ages has claimed vengeance for himself. When Jesus faced a woman taken in adultery, a capital offense, he did not require the death penalty. They say Jesus' own death illustrates the unfairness of the penalty.

"It's hard for Christians to be enthusiastic about the death penalty when they think of the cross," says Glenn Stassen, associate professor of Christian ethics at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Southworth, thoughtful, bald and bearded, emphasizes it is not easy to consider taking a life in punishment.

"What I came down to, and it's from Genesis 9 more than anything else, is that people are created in the image of God," Southworth says. "To deliberately take the life of another human being is finally such an egregious offense against God that he has ordained that (death) to be the punishment for the offense."

Those who claim only the Old Testament requires death for certain crimes forget that Jesus never taught anything to contradict the Old Testament, claims Southworth. "That argument dichotomizes the nature of God," he says. "It says aspects of God's character are actually different characters. It divorces the love of God from the justice of God."

Stassen, who frequently testifies in Kentucky during presentencing after a man has been found guilty of a capital crime, issues no blanket condemnation of capital punishment because "What would you have done if you'd had a chance to do that to Adolf Hitler?"

But he says, "The New Testament is definitely opposed to capital punishment," and in no trial where Stassen testified did the jury render a judgment of death.

Bill Tillman, assistant professor of ethics at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, says capital punishment was a last option in the Bible. When it was exercised, it was also an indictment on the community for its failure to produce a good citizen.

Capital punishment as a deterrent to future crimes is not proven. The latest study, from another country, shows capital crime decreases for several weeks immediately following a well-publicized execution, but rises after, often to a rate higher than before the execution.

In fact, the six states with the lowest rate of capital crime do not have capital punishment.

Abolitionists also declare the burden of punishment falls heavily on the poor and minorities. That a rich man can escape the ultimate punishment for the same crime is injustice enough to declare the punishment immoral, say 16 denominations which condemn the death penalty.

To Southern Baptists, absent from that list, Joe Ingle, director of Southern Prison Ministries, says, "It sure would be helpful if they would address one of the primary moral issues of the day, that of capital punishment."

Tel Aviv Artists Protest
Baptist Gallery Closing

By Elizabeth Smith

TEL AVIV, Israel (BP)--A groundswell of protests from Tel Aviv artists has followed Baptists' recent decision to close Dugith Gallery as a commercial exhibiting art gallery.

Artists, many of whom had their first exhibitions at Dugith and since have gained national recognition, are coming daily to the gallery's director, Chandler Lanier, Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board representative from Georgia, to express their dismay at the news circulating in the art community of Israel's largest city.

One group of more than 20 artists has turned to radio, television, and the major Hebrew newspapers and journals in an effort to arouse public interest to keep the gallery, in the heart of Tel Aviv's shopping and entertainment section, from closing.

Lanier explains that increasing municipal taxes, inflationary operating costs, and the drop in art sales have forced Baptists to cease operating Dugith as a commercial enterprise and to change to a community center program for Christian congregations in greater Tel Aviv and the general public.

When Dugith opened in 1959 it sold books on art and religion. Exhibitions by Israeli artists, at first only for decorative purposes, soon became the major focus and the shop rapidly gained reputation as a serious art gallery.

Lanier estimates that during the 18 years he has been director more than 200 artists have exhibited their paintings, drawings, etchings, photographs, sculpture and other creations.

Several artists have publicly expressed their sorrow that "our gallery, the place where we feel at home," is closing, and art critics have praised Baptists' contribution to the cultural life of the city throughout the years.

"I feel that this current reaction by the artists is an affirmation of what Baptists have tried to do over the last 22 years, and I believe that this has brought us a basis of good will on which to build our new program," Lanier said.

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Black HMB Leader
Smith Succumbs

Baptist Press
7/28/81

ATLANTA (BP)--Roland T. Smith, 79, the first black to have an executive position with the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board, died July 23.

Smith was appointed associate to the director of Negro work in 1942 and served until 1949. He also was among 18 Southern Baptist leaders honored by the board in 1979 for "outstanding contributions to racial reconciliation."

A native Georgian, Smith earned degrees from Morehouse College, Selma University, Arkansas Baptist College and Atlanta University.

Prior to HMB appointment, Smith was pastor of churches in Georgia and Alabama. He also was pastor in Arkansas following his service with the board, and later resettled in the Atlanta area.

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Action on Associates Seen
As Big 'Morale Booster'

By Erich Bridges

RICHMOND, Va. (BP)--A new policy enabling long-term missionary associates to transfer to career missionary status will prove a "significant morale booster" to associates on foreign fields, according to Bill Marshall, Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board vice president for human resources.

Adopted during the board's July meeting, the new policy will allow associates who successfully complete two terms of service, meet educational requirements and gain board approval to transfer to career status.

"Although the support level for associates has been equal to the career program for several years, this action should eliminate any feeling of 'second classness' among associates," said Marshall. "In the long haul, it will strengthen our career base."

The new policy also affects academically qualified missionary candidates past the 39-year-old beginning age limit for career service. Such candidates may be eligible for career status after two successful terms of associate service.

Other new guidelines allow persons as old as 60 to begin associate service, set minimum educational requirements at 60 hours of college-level course work, provide for separate orientations and debriefings for associates, and authorize increased language study for certain assignments.

Launched in 1961, the missionary associate program employs Southern Baptists past the eligibility age for career mission appointment, and sometimes lacking full educational qualifications, to meet urgent specialized needs on mission fields, usually for single, four-year terms.

In the two decades since, more than 500 associates have worked in mission assignments ranging from maintenance and mechanics to English-language church leadership.

Concern arose in the late '70s about a suspected high rate of early resignations among associates, prompting a comprehensive study of the program, which was completed early this year.

Results indicated that although resignations were high some years, they were very low in others, and were comparable to career missionary resignations overall.

Researchers also found that associates, who usually are assigned to English-language work, typically adjust to foreign service as well as career missionaries, even though they are older and often separated from college-age children.

Approximately half of the associates employed have served for two or more terms, and often until retirement. (Audrey Dyer, the first associate employed, worked for 17 years as a nurse in Nigeria before retiring in 1979.)

While enabling qualified long-termers to transfer to the career program, the new policies recognize the continuing value of one-term, "contract" assignments for associates--such as well drilling, mechanics and printing.