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Jerry Clower Is Addicted
To Doing Things For God

By Bonita Sparrow

FORT WORTH, Texas (BP)—Grand Ole Opry entertainer Jerry Clower tells jokes as easily as most people eat ice cream, and with as much delight. But Clower gets downright solemn when he talks about his addiction.

The award-winning country comic told staff at the Southern Baptist Radio and Television Commission recently he doesn't intend to do anything to break this good habit of "doing things for God."

Clower discovered the word "addicted" when he was a barefoot kid reading his Bible daily "so I could be a hunnerd in BCRU (the forerunner of today's Baptist Church Training) and make Miss Ella happy."

"I told my mama I had found a cuss word in the Bible and, of course, she didn't believe it so I showed her," he said. "Addicted. I'd only heard it used to express something awful like addicted to dope or to alcohol or to smoking."

But when Clower talked with his preacher about that word, addicted, that old saint told him it was also used to describe people who just got into the habit of doing things for God.

"Not long ago I was fishing with a friend and I had a hook in a white perch pretty enough to make a puppy pull a freight train," Clower said. "Well, my friend is addicted to cigarettes and neither of us had a match so he started having a nicotine fit. We had to pull up anchor and walk a mile to a country store for matches. Let's get as addicted to serving God and telling people about Jesus as my friend is addicted to cigarettes."

Clower's addiction to doing things for God isn't one he wants to break. An outspoken Christian, he was telling people about Jesus long before he had a forum at the Grand Ole Opry, on the national television shows where he makes regular guest appearances, or on "Country Crossroads," which he co-hosts for the Radio and Television Commission.

"There are times when you're onstage and the people who came for you to make them laugh aren't there to hear you preach," Clower said. "But folks know Christianity is a part of me and usually somebody will say, 'Jerry, you have some Christian convictions' and they'll give me an opportunity to express them. Sometimes not, but your Christian speech will betray you."

His 10-year success as a comedian has contributed to the wide acceptance of "Country Crossroads" by both the industry and listeners. The Baptist radio program is now on more than 1,300 stations. And as the program grew in popularity it also helped introduce Clower to the public. Not everyone knows he has never charged a dime for his duties as the show's co-host.

"'Country Crossroads' is a place of Christian service for me," he explained. "I'm a storehouse tither—I give a minimum of 10 percent of my income to First Baptist Church in Yazoo City, Miss., annually, but I like to do something in addition to my tithe. I can give my time on 'Country Crossroads' as a gift to God. It's a place where I can express my Christian convictions."

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Clower's salesmanship for God gets results. Perhaps the best known was reported by a woman taxi driver in Hot Springs, Ark. She told Clower her family's only shared activity was listening to "Country Crossroads." The father, facing heart surgery, decided to go to church to see if there really was anything to what Jerry Clower said about God.

The man became a Christian and led his two sons and daughter to Christ. His daughter's husband followed and led his mother, father and a brother "who was bad to drink" to the Lord. The last Clower heard, the family was still witnessing and winning.

For all his bravado and bluster onstage, Clower is modest about his humor. "I had a record come out not long ago and all those Hollywood types kept talking about how creative I am," he said. "But there's no limit to what can be done if you don't care who gets the credit.

"Why, not long ago I was in downtown Yazoo City, standing with my foot on the bumper of my pickup visiting with some of my buddies. A funeral procession started and when it got close we hushed up laughing and stood with our hands over our hearts to show respect and I leaned over to an old boy and whispered, 'Who died?' And he whispered back, very solemnly, 'The one in the first car.'"

That wisdom didn't come from a Hollywood lawyer, Clower reminded, "but from a welder with a fourth-grade education."

Has show business success changed Jerry Clower? "Naw," he said. "I traveled before I went into show business. Now I'm just gone a lot longer and travel a lot further. I still go fishing with my friends in Yazoo City and I still like to eat sardines when I fish. But while I used to eat sardines that cost 15 cents a can, now I eat sardines that cost \$1.50 a can, so I guess you could say my sardines are a little more sophisticated."

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(BP) photo mailed to state Baptist papers by Radio and Television Commission.

Electronic Denominations
Predicted by Sociologist

By Dan Martin

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WASHINGTON (BP)--Electronic churches may spawn electronic denominations, a sociologist told participants at the National Religious Liberty Conference in Washington.

Jeffrey K. Hadden, a professor at the University of Virginia and co-author of a new book, "Prime Time Preachers," said the sophistication of new computer-based communications techniques--which allow direct communication between the broadcasters and audiences--makes possible the rise of the new denominations.

Addressing the biennial Religious Liberty Conference sponsored by the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, Hadden said such denominations also will be hastened by an ever increasing need for funds to keep the programs on the air.

"The propensity of the televangelists to equate their grandiose dreams with God's will, and their childlike trust that the Almighty will deliver the bucks to pay for their monumental projects, no matter how ambitious, portends a disastrous conclusion someday," he said.

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He added that more and more evangelists competing for money from an audience which has not increased appreciably "may hasten the day when one or more of the major ministries collapses."

Such pressures, he said, "could eventually lead some of them into the franchising business," creating what essentially would be "branch offices" of the national organization to support the television ministry and its ancillary projects.

"A skillful blending of communications technology and face-to-face recruiting techniques developed by groups such as the Mormons could result in rapid church development," Hadden said. "The televangelists and their local organizations could expect to receive a good bit of criticism for robbing the pews of other churches, but 'member snatching' has been going on for a long time among proselytizing evangelicals."

Hadden said Jerry Falwell "is perhaps best positioned to move in this direction. For all intents and purposes he already has the organizational structure in place with Liberty Baptist College and Liberty Baptist Seminary."

"Among his many ambitious goals for the current decade is the establishment of 5,000 new churches," Hadden said. "Falwell denies any interest in founding a new denomination (but) were Falwell inclined, it would take little effort to transform independent Baptists into Falwellian Baptists."

He also noted Pat Robertson of Christian Broadcasting Network has a structure which could be transformed into local congregations, with prayer and counseling centers in 83 cities, manned by 10,000 volunteers.

"If other televangelists are not as ideally organized to create new denominations as Falwell and Robertson, they still possess considerable resources to build churches that would owe allegiance to them," Hadden said.

He added the reasons such "branch offices" have not been created are that the electronic ministries are "very young" and that the television evangelists have a "moral hesitancy. It requires some mental gymnastics to go about the business of starting local churches and simultaneously deny that one is in competition with local churches."

The rationale, once such denominations begin, he said, will be that they are filling a need unmet by others. Their experience in referring new converts to local congregations, they will argue, was too often unsuccessful because the local church failed to shepherd the newly won souls adequately.

Hadden had a word of advice for Baptist executives: "Were I a church executive, especially in a conservative denomination, I would treat the electronic church franchising scenario with utmost seriousness. I would want to have a game plan to deal with franchising. It may not happen, but, were I a gambling man, I would not bet against this development."

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Baptist, Jewish Leaders
Note Evangelism Limits

By Stan Haste

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WASHINGTON (BP)--Two nationally known leaders, one Southern Baptist and the other Jewish, told participants at a religious liberty conference that evangelizing and proselytizing are contradictory methods of winning religious converts.

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Jimmy R. Allen, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Radio and Television Commission, said Baptists are committed to "true evangelism," which he said involves by definition the freedom to accept or reject God's offer of grace in Jesus Christ. Proselytization, he said, involves "winning somebody to your point of view."

Marc Tanenbaum, national director of interreligious affairs for the American Jewish Committee, said that while the question of evangelism is sensitive for the Jewish community, "Jews would join...in making a differentiation between witness and proselytization."

The two, long personal friends, addressed the opening session of the biennial Religious Liberty Conference sponsored by the Washington-based Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, on the legitimate limits of evangelism in the context of religious liberty.

Tanenbaum, who emphasized the historic kinship between Jews and Baptists as champions of religious liberty, went on to say that his faith community has special problems with "Messianic Jews" who pose as traditional Jews "as a deception to entrap people." Such deception, he said, "is not worthy of a high religion like Christianity."

Allen, noting that Jews and Baptists currently suffer persecution together, particularly in the Soviet Union, said that both "believe the faith is worth living for and dying for."

For Christians, he went on, the call to evangelize is "ironclad."

"We believe it (the gospel) and believe it enough to share it," he declared. At the same time, the voluntary response of those evangelized must be respected, the former Southern Baptist Convention president said.

Asked to comment on the special attention paid during his recent visit to the U.S. by Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin to television evangelist Jerry Falwell, both Allen and Tanenbaum said they had worked to convince the Israeli leader that Falwell does not speak for most American Christians.

After a highly publicized visit with Falwell at the Blair House in Washington, Begin accepted a Tanenbaum suggestion to see other Christian leaders from mainline denominations in New York prior to his departure.

Another speaker, sociologist David O. Moberg of Marquette University, also hit the religious right as "shallowly grounded."

An active churchman from the Baptist General Conference, Moberg described as "myth" the notion that "America is a Christian nation." The nation's real religious heritage, he said, is pluralism, which he called both a source and product of religious liberty.

Pluralism "in a sense has made us all heretics," Moberg elaborated, in that no theological viewpoint is orthodox and acceptable to all, even within individual Christian congregations.

Another contemporary factor influencing evangelism, Moberg went on, is secularism, although he downplayed its influence. Saying that there is a "gloss of Christianity" even on the secular in the U.S., Moberg cited studies showing that, contrary to popular assumptions, more Americans worship at churches and synagogues on any given Sunday than the total attendance at all sporting events for a whole year.

He said that Christians should avoid what he called "demonic dualisms" which set up false, either/or choices such as personal piety versus social involvement or evangelism versus social activism. Such "demonic dualisms" should be converted into "dynamic duos" which affirm that both are essential in the task of evangelism," he said.

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Evangelist Urges Churches
To Be 'Heaven on Earth'

By Patti Stephenson

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ATLANTA (BP)--To reach America's cities for Christ, Southern Baptists must learn to "invade and occupy the enemy's territory" and build churches which are "live models of heaven on earth," New York City evangelist Tom Skinner told Baptist leaders in Atlanta.

Skinner, who led the "Harlem Lords" street gang before his conversion to Christianity, challenged participants in the Baptist Home Mission Board's Fall Forum on Urban Evangelism to become "agents of reconciliation" in America's urban centers.

"God hasn't called us to grow homogeneous churches, but to proclaim the good news to everyone, including the cities' blacks and poor," Skinner said. "God doesn't intend for churches to perpetuate the unbalanced demographics of society," he added, but to illustrate heaven.

Skinner warned, "You won't call the city factions together until Christians are together in prayer, dialogue and soul-searching." He urged pastors to "bleed together and heal each other's wounds" as they strive to reach the cities.

Skinner advised urban churches to bring together the employers and the unemployed in their midst to fight the poverty crippling American cities.

"God's commitment to the poor is biblical," Skinner observed, "and city ministry must begin with the poor. Instead of our tithes going into stained-glass windows and parking lots, they should go to others."

Some churches help the poor for a selfish reason, Skinner said. That is to get them on their feet so they don't bother the church again. Instead, churches are called "to help the poor so they can help churches help even more of the poor," he said.

Such an approach would allow churches to meet needs in the cities which the government can no longer handle, he predicted.

Skinner claimed today's urban dwellers are "more hungry for the Good News than ever, but they're rejecting the ecclesiastical forms we cling to."

The church must provide options in urban settings and concentrate on "raising a new generation of leaders committed to cities," the evangelist stated.

"If people see a live model of heaven on earth, we won't need membership drives," Skinner stressed. "The people will come to us."

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