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News Service of the Southern Baptist Convention

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Cottonpatch Gospel  
Begins National Tour

By Jim Newton

ATLANTA (BP)--Jesus Christ, born in Gainesville, Ga., dramatically spent this Christmas in Atlanta--preaching, healing, proclaiming love to the outcast and casting out the religious "sons of snakes" from downtown First Church.

Charged with inciting to riot, vagrancy, destruction of private property and feeding 5,000 at a fast-food joint without a health permit, he was lynched by a mob led by Ku Klux Klansmen while authorities were transporting him to the Lee Correctional Institute in Leesville, Ga.

Three days later he came back to life, greeting his friends with "Howdy," and drinking a cup of coffee and eating a piece of pecan pie after literally walking through the door. "It worked," he told his followers--including some who doubted he would return to life.

"The Cottonpatch Gospel," a two-hour musical featuring Tom Key, a former Southern Baptist from Birmingham, and music by the late Harry Chapin stormed Atlanta like Sherman's march, breaking box-office records.

Ending a six-months' run in Atlanta's Memorial Arts Center Dec. 26, Cottonpatch Gospel is the longest-running play in Atlanta's history. Previously, Cottonpatch played to rave reviews off-Broadway in New York City, Boston and Philadelphia.

Now the show is going on the road, scheduled at Samford University in Birmingham, Jan. 11-30; at the new Plaza Theater in Dallas, Feb. 15--March 25, and Holy Week (Easter) performances at Knott's Berry Farm in Los Angeles.

It's the kind of drama Southern Baptists can support. Taken almost completely from "The Cotton Patch Version of Matthew and John" by Clarence Jordan (a Southern Baptist theologian who established Koinonia Farms near Americus, Ga.), the play portrays what it would be like if Jesus Christ had been born today in the deep South.

Two inseparable ingredients make the play work: Tom Key's multiple character acting and Chapin's music (hand-clapping, foot-stomping, toe-tapping country western mixed with a little bluegrass) presented by a quartet of Christian young men called the Cotton Pickers.

Chapin was killed on a Long Island freeway just one month before the play opened in New York. He wrote music and lyrics for 18 songs in the play, recognized as the best music he ever wrote, including a hauntingly beautiful melody, "Jubilation," that sums up the entire message: "Love the Lord your God, with all your heart, soul and mind; love your neighbor as you love yourself."

But the music without Tom Key's acting wouldn't work, just as Key's former one-man show wouldn't make it without Chapin's music. Key is indomitable. For two hours, he preaches, stomps, dances, shouts, sings and jumps from character to character, portraying almost 20 different roles--primarily Matthew, the narrator.

Key grew up in Shades Mountain Baptist Church in Birmingham, bringing to the play a cultural and theological understanding few others could match.

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Recently at First Baptist Church, Chamblee, Ga., in suburban Atlanta, Key recounted his personal Christian experience, saying it was seeing the movie "Bonnie and Clyde" that prompted him to become a follower of the Jesus he dramatically portrays.

He saw the movie six times, identifying with "a murderer and a thief," realizing he could have been a murderer if he had grown up in a different culture. The summer after high school graduation he traveled throughout the country with a Christian friend, Allen Andrews, who witnessed to him. On a beach in Oregon, Key realized Christ died so "I could put my hand back in the hand of God where it belongs."

For six months he read the New Testament to try to understand the biblical, not the cultural, basis of morality. For a while he felt God was calling him into the ministry but later realized his gifts were in the area of drama, not preaching.

Later in life, he joined Grace Episcopal Church in New York City, feeling more comfortable as an artist with the more liturgical style of worship. But he is especially grateful for being raised in an SBC church because "The Bible was the first place I thought to turn...if I had not been raised in a Southern Baptist church where the Bible is the center of everything, I might have turned to philosophy books or whatever happened to be in vogue at the time."

Phil Getter, a former Wall Street banker and producer of the play, said in an interview that Key becomes so personally involved "he's not playing a role--he becomes Jesus on the stage."

Getter, a Jew, calls the play "the greatest story ever told," and accepts Jesus' teachings, although he rejects him as Messiah. Getter said response to the play has been "overwhelming," but expressed some disappointment there has not been more support from organized religion, especially Southern Baptists.

Key admits the play is hard for some Southern Baptists to take, especially the scene when Jesus enters the courtyard of "First Church, Atlanta" (no denomination named) and smashes a beautiful shopping mall of religious gifts with a sledgehammer. Key also calls the ministerial staff "sons of snakes" because they have turned the church "into a banker's club and a religious racket."

Although Jesus is never identified as a Baptist in the play, the affiliation is implied by one line which tells of Jesus going to the annual "Believe the Bible Society Convention" at a brand-new convention center in Atlanta, "and nothing draws the Baptists like a new building."

The message is penetrating, prophetic, convicting; but the music offsets the dramatic content with its upbeat, happy style.

Getter, Key and the cast don't like for Cottonpatch to be compared with such Broadway successes as "Jesus Christ, Superstar" or "Godspell."

Key said both these plays were strong on portraying the humanity of Jesus, but weak on depicting his deity. Cottonpatch seeks to proclaim both and includes the resurrection and ascension, when Jesus he gives the Great Commission to his followers.

Key and each of the Cotton Pickers say being in the play has changed and deepened their lives spiritually. Key and Dan Fox, the high-voiced tenor who looks and sings like John Denver, say they have felt the presence of the Holy Spirit in the performances.

The play has given Christmas a new meaning to the cast, for each time they do it, they have experienced both Christmas and Easter.

But for the 35,000 people who have seen it during the past six months, the story has had mysterious reality. For they have realized it could have happened here and now. To us.

Church Activities Continue  
Despite 7 P.M. Curfew in Surinam

PARAMARIBO, Surinam (BP)--Baptists and missionaries in Surinam are continuing normal church programs despite a 7 p.m. curfew resulting from an abortive coup attempt early in December.

In at least one case Baptists arrived at a missionary's home before the curfew for prayer services and then spent the night there.

A number of families from America and Holland have left the country. Economic uncertainties have developed, with a freeze on imports and strict control of money flowing out of the country, according to Leo Waldrop, Southern Baptist missionary press representative.

Plans for the coup, scheduled for Dec. 25, were discovered early in December and more than 20 leaders have been executed.

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Baptist Elected  
President of SACW

Baptist Press  
12/30/82

MARION, Ala. (BP)--The academic dean of Judson College, William D. Murray, is the newly-elected president of the Southern Association of Colleges for Women.

Murray, dean of Judson College since 1972, was previously chairman of the Division of Education and Psychology at Samford University, 1943-64, and dean of Louisiana College.

Twenty-seven colleges compose the SACW. Baptist schools include Westhampton College of the University of Richmond in Virginia, Judson in Alabama, Tift in Georgia, Meredith in North Carolina and Blue Mountain in Mississippi.

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Change of Address Announced  
For Woman's Missionary Union

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BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (BP)--Woman's Missionary Union, auxiliary to the Southern Baptist Convention, has announced a change in its mailing address.

The new address is 600 North 20th Street, Post Office Box C-10, Birmingham, AL 35283-0010.

The addition of the post office box in the address is in preparation for WMU's move to its new national headquarters in 1984.

Although the new site is in Shelby County, Ala., 12 miles from WMU's current location, the new headquarters will continue to have a Birmingham mailing address.

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'Liberated' Palestinian  
Now Active Reconciler

By Michael Tutterow

Baptist Press  
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ATLANTA (BP)--When Israeli tanks rolled through his Palestinian homeland in 1948 Anis Shorrosh vowed revenge.

This December, 34 years after the Israeli invasion left his father and cousin dead, Shorrosh made his twentieth visit to Israel. But now Shorrosh bombards Israelis with "the love of God in Jesus Christ."

Two generations ago, family members dead and his mother and sister forced to flee and join his brother in Jordan, Shorrosh decided to wage a personal war against Jews.

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"My home was gone and it didn't seem I would have a future at all," Shorrosh said. "If there had been terrorist organizations I would have probably been a member of them. I would say that I could have blown up planes and killed people with no regrets."

But plans for violence and an attempt to take his own life went awry. Influenced by his mother, one of the first Palestinians to profess Christ as a result of Southern Baptist work in Palestine, Shorrosh made a profession of faith.

"It gave me hope that in the midst of hopelessness God can still work," he said, "and in the midst of war and conflict you can have peace with God."

Despite only a seventh-grade education, Shorrosh came to study in the United States with the help of Southern Baptist missionaries earning both college and seminary degrees. Yet, despite personal peace in Christ, he remained bitter. Failing a Hebrew course helped him recognize his suppressed hatred toward Jews.

"I was saying I loved the Jews," Shorrosh said, "but I still hated them. I didn't want to learn their language." Determined to change, he prayed "every Saturday for four years for the Jews."

"I learned the way to love your enemies is the way Jesus demonstrated: pray for them, do good to them that despitefully use you and persecute you. In other words, not retaliation, neither being a pacifist, but be an active lover, forgiver, intercessor, reconciler."

At the end of four years Shorrosh again took the course--and passed. "Forgiveness is one of the most effective means to find peace of mind," he said.

Following graduation from New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, he and his family returned to the Middle East where Shorrosh became pastor of East Jerusalem (Arab) Baptist Church until 1966. He then entered full-time evangelism and in 1967 returned to the United States and set up the Anis Shorrosh Evangelistic Association in Mobile, Ala.

In the past 16 years Shorrosh's preaching tours have taken him around the world six times and to Israel 19 times. In each country his message remains simple: God forgives and empowers people to forgive others.

His extensive travels have allowed him to view Southern Baptists' mission efforts in dozens of countries. While Shorrosh applauded Southern Baptists' intentions to take the gospel to all the world he warned "there is a danger that the missionaries of Christianity could alienate themselves from the people with whom they work because of an extremely high standard of living. How in the world are you going to win people to Jesus when they think Jesus is an emperor?" he added.

He challenged Baptist missionaries to not only learn the language but to identify with the culture and lifestyle of the people with whom they work.

He also chastised Southern Baptists in America who "declare to the world that we are missionary-minded" yet build "multi-million dollar" centers for worship. "We should put our money where our mouth is," claimed Shorrosh, "not where our feet are."

Increased tensions in the Middle East merit Southern Baptist concern, Shorrosh said, although he usually avoids political debates and concentrates on preaching. He thinks Baptists need to "do something substantial for the people in the Mideast," and suggested studies on Middle East issues and providing food, clothing, shelter and educational ministries "because of compassion."

He primarily stressed the need for the gospel and pointed to the massacre of Palestinians in Beirut, Lebanon, as an example of how "desperately we need reconciliation and love instead of hate."

"This is what is missing," Shorrosh asserted. "Neither Jews nor Arabs, not even the so-called Christians, know Jesus. That's why the bloodshed, the hate and the misunderstanding."

During his last visit to Israel Shorrosh told a group of Israeli soldiers how he once hated Jews, but "I found peace with God through Jesus, the Messiah. Because of this I stand before you to say I love you because of Jesus."

Shorrosh said the event convinced him peace is possible in the Middle East, but warned that both Jews and Arabs must forgive and accept one another before hostilities will cease.

Shorrosh intends to emphasize reconciliation again during this trip to Israel. "We need to forgive each other and not destroy each other," he explained. "Guns have not produced a solution but I believe the gospel will."

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WMU Raises Rates in 1983  
On Four Quarterly Magazines

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BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (BP)--Woman's Missionary Union, auxiliary to the Southern Baptist Conv ntion, will raise subscription rates for its four quarterly publications beginning with the July-August-September 1983 issue.

The quarterlies and their new yearly rates are Dimension and Aware, \$5; Start, \$6, and Share, \$10.

Although WMU was forced to increase subscription rates for its monthly magazines last year, it has been almost two years since the SBC agency raised prices for quarterlies.

Mary Hines, customer services division director for WMU, SBC, attributed the increase to postage and production costs, which in some cases have almost doubled since subscriptions were raised. Hines also said that Start, the quarterly for leaders of Mission Friends, will be expanded by 16 pages beginning with the October-November-December 1983 issue.

Rates for the five monthly magazines WMU publishes will remain the same.

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