



BAPTIST PRESS

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SBC Will 'Erode,'
Decline: Criswell

By Jim Jones

DALLAS (BP)--W.A. Criswell, a Baptist legend who for more than 50 years has preached a literal Bible and an uncompromising 19th century religious fundamentalism, says the Southern Baptist Convention is declining and will be replaced as the major evangelical denomination in the United States.

"I don't think we will ever split. I think we will erode...I think we will gradually acquiesce," Criswell said.

"God will raise up somebody else to take our place."

His comments--delivered with dramatic gestures and the deep, sonorous tones familiar to those who have heard him preach--came during a late-night interview at the First Baptist Church of Dallas, which has grown to house the largest Southern Baptist congregation in the world since he became pastor in 1944.

The pastor, who recently preached a sermon saying "infidels" are taking over Southern Baptist colleges and seminaries, sees his church as an exception. But he believes there are irreversible trends indicating that Southern Baptists as a whole are following the path of the United Methodist, Presbyterian and other mainline denominations that have de-emphasized soul-winning evangelism and have turned inward.

"The death that I see in these old-line denominations is coming to our Southern Baptist Convention...little by little," he said.

Criswell's views would be disputed by scores of Baptists, who would say that any waning of revivalism means Baptists are maturing and now seek a more balanced treatment of winning converts while still nurturing those in their congregations already converted to Christianity. Others would agree with Criswell that straying from evangelism will prove fatal to the SBC.

Criswell hopes Baptists prove him wrong about the slipping evangelical zeal, but he is not optimistic. "Sporadic efforts will be made to bring us back to evangelism," he said, adding he believes the current move by inerrantists to denominate the convention is one of those efforts.

Eventually, Baptists will lose out to more evangelical groups," Criswell said. "Give them time...give them time."

"For example, I don't know when I've seen a great revival among Baptists. By revival I mean people would be moved Godward and heavenward ... We try to have evangelistic crusades and a few others try but it is not the main thrust of preachers in our churches anymore.

"I don't know of the great evangelistic fervor pouring out of our schools where these young preachers are being trained. In schools, evangelism (winning converts) is played down and seen as inconsequential."

Despite his dire predictions, Criswell says he is not "burnt out," has no plans for retirement and will continue to try to turn Southern Baptists in an evangelical direction as long as he lives.

The 73-year-old Criswell is long past regular retirement age, but he showed no signs of fatigue, even though he had risen early, completed a long work day and had taken part in a Wednesday night church service.

He still works out at the Dallas YMCA near his church and he seldom lets anyone substitute for him in the pulpit.

"I preach three times..twice on Sunday morning and once at night," he said. "It tires the life out of me, but I do it."

First Baptist, with 24,000 members and a budget of \$8 million a year, occupies more than four blocks of downtown Dallas property--a complex sometimes referred to as "the Baptist Vatican." The original spired red-brick church is sandwiched between modern low-rise buildings and skyscrapers.

"I had a man...a very reasonable man, tell me the other day that we could sell the property of the First Baptist Church of Dallas for \$200 million," Criswell said.

The church was \$8 million in debt until the W.A. Criswell Foundation and Lincoln Properties Inc. of Dallas put together a \$300 million office building project in 1981.

The Criswell Foundation is a corporation separate from the church and its basic purpose is to give financial support to the church, the Criswell Center for Biblical Studies, where future clergymen receive training and the Criswell Academy, a private 12-grade elementary and secondary school with 1,000 students.

Now the debt has been retired and the church, which sold a parking garage that was a major cause of the debt, still retains the right to use the parking facilities at night and on Sundays.

Criswell's own ministry is typical of the Horatio Alger "rags to riches" success novels which were his favorites as a boy.

His mother wanted him to be a doctor--following her father's footsteps--but even during his childhood he dreamed of being a preacher. By the time he went to Baylor University, he already had been ordained. He worked his way through--graduating magna cum laude--as pastor of four small churches near Waco.

He earned master's and doctor's degrees from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., earning his way by serving country churches in Kentucky.

He insists he feels no different as pastor of the SBC's largest congregation than he did when serving country churches. "I prayed then. I tried then. I worked then. I visited then. I did everything I could as a country preacher. I do that now." he said.

Criswell was a relative unknown when he came from First Baptist Church in Muskogee, Okla., to succeed the late George W. Truett--one of his idols--at Dallas in October, 1944.

From his days of poverty, Criswell has grown up with Dallas and admittedly has become a wealthy clergyman. "I would imagine I am the most affluent preacher you ever saw...," he said.

He receives royalties from 15 books and his own Criswell Study Bible, but doesn't reveal his salary or the investments or contributions that have given him material wealth. But he readily talks about his good fortune: "It's a providence and I cannot understand it. It's just like a Midas touch...you'd think everything I touch turns to gold."

Criswell insists: "I've never been caught up in a worldly grasping...I never have. And I think because of that God has blessed me (materially) beyond any preacher I know."

He somehow equates his own material wealth with that of the church. In fact, he has promised that when he dies, all the salary he has ever been paid will be returned to the congregation. "The church has been very, very blessed," he added.

Baptist Reaction Varies
On Ministers' Tax Change

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (BP)--Without minimizing its financial impact, Southern Baptist ministers are apparently reacting mildly to the recent announcement by the Internal Revenue Service that it will discontinue the double housing tax break enjoyed by clergy under a 1962 revenue ruling.

After June 30 ministers will no longer be allowed an income tax deduction for any mortgage interest or real estate taxes for which they have received a tax-exempt housing allowance.

"It's only fair, it seems to me, that the double deduction be eliminated," said Deryl Fleming, pastor of Ravensworth Baptist Church, Annandale, Va. "I guess I'm surprised that it took so long to correct an obviously inappropriate and unfair benefit to clergy. I can't imagine how the ruling got on the books in the first place."

The 1962 ruling which specifically permitted the double benefit was revoked by an opposite ruling this January in what an IRS spokesman described as an effort to be consistent in its enforcement of the law's ban on double tax breaks.

"It really was an unusual break for ministers," said William C. Storms, pastor of Travis Baptist Church, Corpus Christi, Texas, who purchased his first house four months ago. Storms told Baptist Press he had mixed feelings about the change, noting, "It was a great business deal, but at the same time, why should I expect this when nobody else gets it?"

The news of the IRS switch in policy took most ministers by surprise, according to Jim Dawkins, director of education for Mount Vernon Association in northern Virginia, who broke the news to ministers in his area before it was widely publicized.

Many ministers, Dawkins said, wondered why they had the double benefit, "although they appreciated it." Dawkins and others expressed concern over the financial strain on ministers' budgets caused by the abruptness of the ruling.

While saying that "in terms of tax equity it would seem fair to deny this kind of double exclusion," Everett C. Goodwin, pastor of First Baptist Church, Washington, D.C., criticized the lack of time between the announcement and implementation of the change.

"The shortness of warning is going to put a lot of pastors in a pretty tight spot," Goodwin said. "Six months is not much lead time."

Goodwin also predicted the change may tilt more ministers and churches toward the use of parsonages, a move he said would deny local jurisdictions local property taxes.

Since running a news story about the tax policy change in Louisiana's Baptist Message, Editor Lynn Clayton has discussed it with numerous pastors in that state and concluded that the impact will be heavy on ministers who have purchased homes.

"For 20 years the IRS encouraged pastors buying homes to take advantage of the double tax benefit," Clayton explained. "The denomination has generally encouraged pastors to give consideration to buying their own homes. Now this sudden tax burden is going to mean extreme financial hardship on these people who have followed the lead given by the IRS."

Clayton said many pastors considered housing the best investment they could make in light of the 1962 IRS ruling. "My feeling is, if IRS feels compelled to do this, they should have done it in steps so it wouldn't have been such a severe increase at one time," he added.

While the ruling may have significant financial impact on ministers, its effect on the federal treasury is uncertain. An IRS spokesman told Baptist Press the tax-collecting agency has no revenue estimates since the change was designed not as a revenue raising procedure but as an effort to remove inconsistencies in tax practice.

Note To Editors: Please substitute the following paragraph for the fourth paragraph in the BP story, "Africans Stranded On Beaches; Missionaries Rush To Help" in BP mailing 1/26/83": "The board offered to send an emergency medical team, but was turned down by the Togo government, which said it already had the medical personnel needed."

Thanks, BP

Detroit Students
Favor Telecourse

By Lee Holloway

Baptist Press
1/27/83

DETROIT, Mich. (BP)--It was a first for everyone involved, as students participated in a Seminary Studies telecourse in Detroit recently.

They registered positive reactions to the experience in a survey conducted at the close of the course. Asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement with ten statements on a scale of one to five (with five as "strongly agree"), the students averaged scores of four or higher on almost every point.

The course was the first of six telecourses planned by the Seminary Studies Department, part of the Seminary External Education Division of the six Southern Baptist seminaries. Funding for the project was provided by a grant from the Arthur Vining Davis Foundation of Coral Gables, Fla.

James Blevins, professor of New Testament interpretation at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, taught the course "Introduction to the Bible." Instead of the usual lectures, however, Blevins made nine videotaped presentations to the class from the Southern campus in Louisville, Ky. Immediately following each presentation, Blevins and the class were linked by a conference telephone connection to discuss questions or issues by the videotape.

Students gave their highest marks to the quality and content of the videotapes, scoring them an average 4.82 out of a possible 5.0.

James Jones, pastor of First Baptist Church, Trenton, Mich., was "learning facilitator" for the course, convening each of the eleven sessions, administering the mid-term and final examinations and leading the class in learning activities planned by Blevins. His leadership earned him a 4.73 average score from the students.

Participants also responded quite positively to the study guide and book of readings prepared especially for use with the course.

The new approach to the theological education grew out of a need to reduce the commuting time of seminary professors teaching in off-campus locations. The Detroit program is one of five operated jointly by the seminaries through the Seminary Studies Department. Most of the seminaries also sponsor several of their own off-campus programs.

A number of the students felt teaching by video and telephone was as effective as being in a classroom with a professor, although some others were unconvinced. A request for at least one visit in person by the professor was registered on several of the survey forms.

Blevins said the videotaped approach allowed him to cover as much content as he normally covered in a seminary class, even though the time of presentation was somewhat less. He took advantage of the medium by role playing several biblical figures. This is quite a bit more difficult to do in a classroom situation, he acknowledged.

A second telecourse, "Introduction to Pastoral Care," is to be introduced in February to classes meeting simultaneously in Baltimore, Jackson, Tenn., New York and Detroit.

Injured Brazil MK
Recovering Well

CAMPINAS, Brazil (BP)--Missionary kid Brent Depee is recovering well at home following emergency surgery Jan. 2 for a ruptured small intestine.

Depee, son of Southern Baptist missionaries Kent and Donna Depee of Missouri, was injured Dec. 30 when he was thrown against a tree while riding a horse. Surgery was performed at a Brasilia hospital after a difficult 450-mile journey by taxi from rural Barreiras.

The young Depee was released from the hospital Jan. 13 and returned by airplane to Campinas, where his parents are studying Portuguese. He is recovering faster than expected, family members said, and may return to school in February if progress continues.

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Thomas Corts New
Samford President

Baptist Press
1/27/83

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (BP)--Thomas E. Corts, president of Wingate College in North Carolina, has been elected president of Samford University in Birmingham, Ala. He will move to Birmingham in mid-summer and assume the presidency Sept. 1.

The Samford board of trustees elected Corts Jan. 26 following a search lasting more than a year for a successor to Leslie S. Wright, who will retire at the end of his 25th year as president on Aug. 31 to become chancellor.

Corts, 41, has served as president of Wingate, a Baptist college in the Charlotte area with an enrollment of 1,500 students, since 1974. He engineered Wingate's move from junior college to senior college status and conceived and implemented Wingate's unique "Winternational" program, which allows a student at the mid-point of the sophomore year to travel abroad at almost no additional cost. Under his leadership Wingate's endowment grew from less than \$2 million to more than \$6 million, enrollment increased and the number of voluntary donors grew from 400 to more than 2,000.

Born in Terre Haute, Ind., and reared in Ohio, he is a graduate of Georgetown College in Kentucky and holds master's and Ph.D. degrees from Indiana University.

Corts was director of planning, executive dean and chief operating officer at Georgetown College 1967-73. He was chief executive officer for the Kentucky Higher Education Consortium (a cooperative involving Kentucky's state universities, Kentucky Educational Television and Kentucky Department of Public Instruction) during 1973-74.

He and his wife Marla are parents of two daughters, Jennifer, 17, and Rachel, 14, and a son, Christian, 10. Mrs. Corts holds degrees from Houghton College and the University of Kentucky.

Corts is the fifth of seven of children of an Ohio Baptist minister. Three of his brothers are Baptist pastors and another is a former executive vice president of Oklahoma Baptist University.