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'Lost' Church Members
Becoming Christians

By Norman Jameson

86-145
F-Okla.

OKLAHOMA CITY (BP)—When one-half the people who made professions of faith in Christ and were baptized during the annual Starlite Crusade of First Southern Baptist Church in Del City, Okla., already were church members, Pastor Tom Elliff was not surprised.

Nor are evangelists and preachers around the country surprised at the phenomenon of "lost" church members—people who have sat in the pews of evangelical, gospel-preaching churches for years without making a personal commitment.

A person is "saved" or becomes a Christian by accepting Jesus Christ as his personal savior. He becomes a Southern Baptist by making public that profession of faith through baptism into a local church. Theoretically, a person cannot become a church member until he is saved.

When a person makes a public profession of faith but exhibits no evidence of an invasion of God into that life, some Baptists explain away that "profession" as unreal, merely a motion without validity.

But what about the person who confesses faith in Christ, then exhibits a changed life, works in the church, tithes, verbally expresses his faith and leads others to Jesus, assumes church leadership for 20 or 30 years, then appears before the church to say he never was saved?

"There's no need to be baffled," says Elliff, whose church has baptized 16,240 people in the past 19 years. First Southern of Del City has led the Southern Baptist Convention in baptisms eight times since 1967 and in 1980 baptized 2,028. Most of those were years when Elliff's brother-in-law, Bailey Smith, was pastor.

Elliff, at the 15,000-member church since last November when Smith left to go into full-time evangelism, offers several observations.

Too often, he says, the call to commitment to Christ is one of "easy believism." Preachers offer eternal life through Christ without fully explaining the demands of the gospel. Preachers are not fully explaining the "difference between sins and sin nature" to younger children. And, he adds, believers are realizing ultimate evidences of salvation are not found in a specific confession, but in the witness of God's spirit.

"You can be as sure of the fact of your salvation as you are of the fact you exist," Elliff insists.

Preachers like Elliff and Smith, who see many church members seek salvation when they preach, say the new converts do not come after being manipulated from the pulpit but have struggled with their doubt for years.

"Sure, you will find the occasional person who is saved and saved and saved, but he is the exception," says Elliff, who notes he "holds out a biblical plumbline for people to measure themselves against." It is their own decision if they fall short of the standard.

Instead of criticizing them for helping church members resolve their years of doubt, Elliff thinks critics should be more concerned about the half of all church members who "never come to church, who don't want to come to church."

"I believe the devil's greatest tool is for all lost people to believe they're saved," says Smith, himself a lost church member between the ages of five and 10, when he accepted Christ "for real."

Instead of guilt-ridden masses flooding altars with emotions beaten bare and bleeding by evangelists chasing numbers, Smith says the real picture is that only 3 percent of any audience responds to his famous "Wheat or Tares" sermon.

In "Wheat or Tares," which Smith preaches somewhere nearly every week, he contrasts the desirable wheat in the parable in Matthew 13 with the tares, or weeds, that grow up with the wheat.

Smith works the similarities strongly and draws the analogy that as wheat is desirable, so is the Christian. As the tare is trouble in the field, so is the non-Christian hidden among Christians in a church. Therefore the tares in a church would appear the most desirable, that is as the dedicated Christian.

So Smith defines a tare in his sermon as "the best members" in a church: "It's the dedicated deacon, it's the preacher, it's the person who's been faithful in the music ministry for years and sings in the choir. It's the person who gives 20 percent of his income to the church.... They don't commit fornication. They don't curse. They don't smoke pot. They're just the finest people in the church. Remember, the wheat and the tare looked exactly alike."

Critics complain that targeting church members with such a message sows doubt among the saved and causes confusion. But Smith declares, "Any preacher who would cause a saved person to doubt ought to give up the ministry."

A pastor friend of Smith's says when Smith defines tare as he does, "there is almost a psychological certainty a certain number of people will respond."

"That sermon is essentially directed at feelings," says the pastor, who prefers anonymity. "But every stirring in a man's heart does not indicate a need for salvation."

Bob Hamlin, director of evangelism for the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board, said in a letter for Smith after hearing the sermon in his home church, where 122 were saved, that it "was positive from the beginning to end. He did not preach doubt but plainly explained that all who have not received Christ are not in the Kingdom. He clearly told how to receive Christ."

"The only people who complain about church members getting saved are lost church members," Smith says. He notes 4,000 church members have been saved during his crusades in the past three years "and not one wrote to say they wished they hadn't done it."

That number includes 15 Southern Baptist preachers, he adds. He estimates 60 percent of American church members are not saved—40 percent of evangelical church members.

A Christian with occasional doubt needn't fear he is lost, Elliff says, noting the lost person will have a nagging, persistent doubt, not a flash or fleeting thought.

"Salvation is very simple," Smith says. "It's a matter of repenting and inviting Jesus into your heart. That's all it is."

In the heat of delivery, his "Wheat or Tares" sermon seems to emphasize a person's remembering the date, time and place of salvation to validate the experience. Smith says that is not his intent. "I believe you cannot know the date, time and place and still be saved," he says. "I do believe you have to remember the occasion."

Herschel Hobbs, former pastor of First Baptist Church of Oklahoma City and former Southern Baptist Convention president, carefully goes over the biblical plan of salvation with doubters. He asks, "At the time you joined a church, did you truly believe in Jesus as your savior? If yes, you're saved. If they say no, then I tell them, you just joined the church."

"Some say they're not sure. I tell them, "For your own soul satisfaction, if you are not sure, if it would give you a sense of satisfaction to come forward and do it again, I would say you ought to do it."

Hobbs feels, however, that much of the second profession phenomenon is backslidden Christians reconsecrating their lives to God.

"A person will have many experiences where, as a Christian, he has wandered away from God, as did Peter who denied God three times," Hobbs says. "But he will have only one regeneration."

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Church-Member Salvations
Have Roots In Revival Period

By Norman Jameson

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F-Okla.

OKLAHOMA CITY (BP)—The current rash of church members who are re-walking the aisles to become Christians has its roots in the 1940s and 1950s, when a wave of evangelism washed the country, Wayne Bristow believes.

Back then, people walked forward in church, shook hands with the pastor, filled out a card for the church clerk, were presented to the church and put into a Sunday school class, notes Bristow, director of evangelism for Oklahoma Baptists.

"Then you just kind of hoped everything worked out OK," he says. "For some it did. But for thousands and thousands, it didn't.

"Many never prayed to receive Christ. They walked forward saying they wanted to receive Christ. Someone assumed that because they said that, they had received Christ and were told they had. But there had never been a real commitment made by that person. All they had done was express a need. When a person responds to an invitation, that doesn't solve anything. That's just a cry for help.

"If I assume you understand how to make a commitment because you walked forward, I've assumed something I have no right to assume," Bristow insists. "If in that assumption I assure you everything is settled, I've treated you unfairly and have guaranteed that years later you will be confused."

Bristow, who is concerned about effective counseling of people who respond to church invitations to accept Christ, suggests what should happen in those crucial moments:

-- A person needs to understand clearly what is involved in a personal relationship with Christ. It is repentance from sin and a faith commitment to Christ.

-- A person needs to make his own personal commitment. Someone else cannot make it for him.

-- He needs to be shown the biblical basis for assurance. Salvation is not based on feeling or emotion but on God's faithfulness.

-- He must be told about the conflict to come.

"We have a theology being preached today that if you trust Christ, you will be all-American in football, chief executive of your company, Miss America, never be sick, have lots of money, your flowers will bloom and your children will call you blessed," Bristow says. "We set people up to be disillusioned, to feel forsaken or doubt they've ever had the relationship. When conflict comes, they're going to wonder, 'What did I do wrong, or did I ever have it in the first place?'"

-- A person must be discipled.

"If you have a large number of people for whom these things never were true, thousands will suffer doubt," Bristow notes. "You only have to aggravate the feeling a little bit and it will come surging to the surface. We can avoid many people living lives of doubt if we can just take this initial right approach.

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"But if a person is a church member and has never made a personal commitment to Christ, he needs to do that more than he needs breath itself."

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Theology Tied To Growth,
Extension Specialist Says

By Joe Westbury

N-14MB

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HOUSTON (BP)—"You can play church without having any theology, but you can't be church without Jesus," participants at a Southern Baptist Home Mission Board conference on church planting were told.

Nelson Tilton, director of the Atlanta-based agency's church starting department, challenged pastors to be sure their church's growth is tied to sound theology and not sociological trends. The conference was held at First Baptist Church of Houston.

Regardless of the denomination's rapid growth in recent years, Tilton reminded, "only 45 percent of Southern Baptists are actively involved in Sunday worship. The vast majority only attend when it is sociologically exciting. There is simply not much theological commitment and virtually no desire to be involved."

Tilton also cited statistics indicating when churches and denominations rise above middle-class values, they historically lose members and become much smaller.

"This regression is almost inevitable, regardless of theology," he said. "Rarely does theology play into the process; the theology may not have been that strong to begin with." He encouraged pastors to balance church growth through starting new churches as well as growing larger congregations.

Conference speakers elaborated on a variety of successful methods churches have used to spread the gospel throughout their communities.

Billy Bob Moore, director of missions for Houston's Union Baptist Association, said church starting can promote unity among congregations because it focuses their joint purpose on reaching people for Christ. Such efforts also magnify the laity through increased involvement in evangelism, he added.

Moore stressed the efficiency with which new missions spread the gospel: "In Texas, an independent satellite unit (new mission) takes only one-and-a-half people to reach another person for Christ, while an established mission requires nine people to reach the same goal. In our Southern Baptist churches nationwide, that figure drops to between 24 and 35 members needed to reach one person with the gospel.

"The facts are simple. New churches reach lost people," he said.

Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback Valley Community Church in Laguna Hills, Calif., challenged pastors to think like unbelievers as they explore outreach possibilities in their neighborhoods.

"You have to learn the needs of your target audience if you are going to minister to those needs. The simplest way to accomplish that is to ask them—find their mindset, their likes and dislikes, he said. "Ninety-six percent of people contacted in our community told me they would not attend a Bible study, even though we would take no offering and there would be no commitment to join a group. Though that's a great way to get started, why spend our time to reach only 4 percent of our population when they obviously want their needs met in some other way?"

Through an innovative concept of ministry, the congregation which first met in Warren's home has grown to 1,200 members in six years. More than 70 percent of its membership is new converts, he added. Although the church theologically is Southern Baptist, it has not used the word "Baptist" in its name because of negative stereotyping in California.

Jack Lansch, a computer consultant and volunteer to an apartment ministry of First Baptist Church of Houston, detailed ways of starting churches and missions in multi-family housing units.

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"The joy of starting a new work in an apartment project is you don't have to worry about buying five or 10 acres and having to come up with hundreds of thousands of dollars for a building. It's already there and paid for—all you need is an apartment," he said. "Many times we're given them rent-free."

"We meet with apartment owners and tell them we can increase their occupancy rate, decrease vandalism and drug abuse, and therefore help their bottom-line profit. We then ask if they want us to continue, and they always do. That's when we tell them we're out to build a sense of community.

"We then use members of our church to teach classes such as English as a second language, minor auto maintenance and how to shop for groceries. Once we have their confidence and they've broken the ice with each other, we are able to share Christ, Lansch explained.

"How do you spell love? T-I-M-E ... spending your time, giving your talent to a stranger in need. When these people let their guard down and ask you why you're giving your time to help them, you can tell them about Jesus.

"Many of these people have visited a church and felt rejected because they didn't know the language or the rituals. But they're excited when they learn they can worship in their own project and not be in a threatening environment.

"The thing is to take the church to the people rather than requiring the people to come to the church," Lansch said.

The conference was sponsored jointly by the Home Mission Board church extension division and Dunwoody Baptist Church in Atlanta. First Baptist Church of Houston was host for the regional meeting.

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Baptists Praise Life,
Influence, Of Luther Rice

By Jim Newton

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SALUDA, S.C. (BP)—American, Southern and South Carolina Baptist leaders honored the life and influence of Luther Rice on the 150th anniversary of his death in rural South Carolina in 1836.

The Luther Rice sesquicentennial memorial service was held at Pine Pleasant Baptist Church, about 50 miles northwest of Columbia, S.C. Rice is buried in the Pine Pleasant Church cemetery.

Rice, who lived from 1783 to 1836, is considered by historians as the father of American Baptist missions. He and Adoniram Judson were Congregational missionaries to India, and both became Baptists in India in 1812. Rice returned to the United States in 1813 to raise financial support for the Judsons and other Baptist missionaries who followed. Rice was instrumental in organizing the Triennial Convention in 1814, officially called the General Convention of the Baptist Denomination in the United States for Foreign Missions.

During the memorial service, Southern Baptist Historical Commission Executive Director Lynn E. May said Rice, more than any other person, planted the seeds of the Baptist missionary movement and was the founder of Baptist cooperation on state and national scales.

During most of his 23 years of ministry, Rice traveled throughout the eastern seaboard states, visiting Baptist churches and associations, telling them about mission work and challenging them to give to missions, May said.

Wendell Belew, associate vice president of the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board, told of Rice's last missionary journey in 1836. Belew said he recently retraced Rice's 2,000-mile journey. He said he was exhausted afterwards, even though he made the trip in a late-model air-conditioned car. "I can scarcely imagine how Luther Rice must have felt making the trip in a horse-drawn surrey," Belew admitted.

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He said Rice died of appendicitis in the home of a Baptist friend in rural South Carolina. His dying wish was to be buried at the Pine Pleasant Church cemetery, which he called "the most peaceful spot on earth."

John Douhan, associate executive minister of the American Baptist Churches of Massachusetts, said Rice had a dream that was larger than himself. It was his dream for Baptists united in support of world missions that kept him going. His dream was never fulfilled or completed, for Baptists are still trying to carry out his dream, Douhan said.

Harold C. Bennett, president of the Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee, described Rice as a "denominational statesman who reminds us of the importance of reaching around the world for Jesus Christ."

Bennett said Rice died nine years before the formation of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1845, but the things Rice stood for impacted the creation of the convention.

SBC Woman's Missionary Union Executive Director Carolyn Weatherford said although Rice never married, Baptist women today are the spiritual daughters of Luther Rice. One of the major contributions he made was strong support of the belief that women could and should be missionaries, she said.

Weatherford said Woman's Missionary Union is seeking to carry out Rice's dream by helping women organize to learn about missions, become involved in missions and support missions. This year, WMU will raise more than \$100 million for home and foreign missions, she said.

John Roberts, editor of the Baptist Courier, newsjournal of South Carolina Baptists, said Rice was not only a mission supporter but was the editor of what later became the first Baptist state weekly newspaper in America.

In 1822, Rice founded the Columbian Star, the third-oldest weekly religious publication in America. In 1833, the paper was moved to Georgia and the name was changed to the Christian Index, now the weekly publication of the Georgia Baptist Convention. Roberts said one of Rice's greatest contributions was informing Baptists, through his publication and his travels.

Glen Clayton, professor at Furman University and curator of the South Carolina Baptist Historical Society, pointed out the 150th anniversary memorial service was small in comparison to the 100 anniversary observance in 1836. That occasion lasted all day, featured a major address by the late George W. Truett which was broadcast live by CBS radio. Representatives from 33 Baptist bodies involved in the Baptist World Alliance participated in the day-long observance, Clayton said. More than a dozen Baptists who attended the 1936 service were present for the 150th anniversary observance.

The 150th anniversary service was held mostly inside the air-conditioned Pine Pleasant Church, constructed of handmade brick in 1840. The old wooden church burned in 1839, three years after the death of Rice, said retired Navy Chaplain J.C. Brown Jr., pastor of the church organized in 1832.

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(BP) photo mailed to state Baptist newspapers by Atlanta bureau of Baptist Press