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N-SSB

88-13

Consulting Editors Work
For 1991 Commentary Debut

By Jim Lowry

DALLAS (BP)--Consulting editors for a new 40-volume Bible commentary to be published by Broadman Press met in Dallas in mid-January to begin the process of selecting writers and recommending details to move toward a 1991 debut.

The six consulting editors, meeting with General Editor Michael Smith, frequently spoke of the willingness and enthusiasm of Southern Baptist scholars who have been approached regarding their interest in participating in the project.

The commentary project, which began with authorization from Southern Baptist Sunday School Board trustees in February 1987, may include as many as 50 writers and more than 24,000 manuscript pages of biblical and theological translation and interpretation, Smith said.

Prior to this meeting, consulting editors had worked for several weeks gathering names of potential writers to share with the committee. Consideration was given to seminary and college professors, pastors and laymen in biblical areas where they have done extensive study and writing and who approach the Scriptures from a perspective of inerrancy as defined by The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy.

During their meeting, the editors discussed the importance of the commentary's exhibition of scholarship of persons in the denomination and presentation of a scholarly, conservative view of Scriptures.

Curtis Vaughn, professor of New Testament at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, for 37 years before his retirement, and one of the consulting editors, said the new commentary "will be influential for years because of its distinctive features and because it will be more extensive than other commentaries."

"This is something a large segment of our denomination has asked to be prepared. I think it will meet a need."

Paige Patterson, president of Criswell College in Dallas, said the new commentary is "nothing less than an enormous task involving untold hours of research. It will require the patience of Job on the part of the editors and the proofers.

"Because the interpretation of Scripture is always central for churches, this project demands the highest dedication and most determined use of our abilities to produce something that will enhance the lives of our churches."

Consulting Editor L. Russ Bush III, associate professor of philosophy of religion at Southwestern Seminary, said his hopes for the commentary are that it will "provide a useful tool for pastors and Sunday school teachers which would build up the body of Christ by giving more knowledge of Scripture. The time is right for Baptists to produce a commentary with extensive exegesis of Scripture."

Smith said Broadman expects to release about 10 volumes of the commentary each year after the initial release in June of 1991.

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Length of each volume will vary depending on the needs of the writer to deal with the text thoroughly. The maximum length of a volume will be 400 pages, with the book of Psalms requiring two 300-page volumes. Several volumes will include more than one book of the Bible.

Writers will be announced and assignments made this spring, Smith said. He estimated some assignments could require as much as two years to complete.

Other members of the consulting editors' team are Robert Sloan, associate professor of religion at Baylor University, Waco, Texas; Larry L. Walker, professor of Old Testament and Semitic languages at Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, Memphis, Tenn.; and Kenneth Mathews, professor of Old Testament and Semitics, Criswell College.

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Evangelism Challenge
Calls For Retooling

N-CO
(F12)
By Greg Warner

Baptist Press
1/27/88

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (BP)--Evangelism has fallen on hard times. Not only has the luster worn off some of the country's most celebrated televangelists, but the nuts-and-bolts evangelism practiced by the local church also has taken a beating.

Southern Baptists received sobering evidence of that fact in December with news that the number of baptisms in their churches dropped an estimated 6.1 percent during 1987 to the lowest point in nearly a decade -- 341,000.

After peaking at 429,742 in 1980, the baptism figure has been on an almost uninterrupted plunge. Nationwide simultaneous revivals reversed the trend temporarily in 1986, but that encouraging sign was followed by the sharpest drop in more than a decade last year.

Even more discouraging for evangelism strategists is that the decade of decline has come during a period of numerical growth for Southern Baptists. Although more people are joining Baptist churches, fewer are joining as a result of spiritual conversion, marked by baptism.

This suggests Baptist churches are seen as appealing places to hold church membership but not necessarily the place to go to become a Christian.

The conflicting trends also mean Baptists are less efficient in their evangelistic efforts. In 1980 Southern Baptists registered one baptism for every 21 resident church members. Last year the SBC ratio was 1-to-29.

Over the years, Southern Baptists have used the mathematics of baptism to gauge the spiritual health of their denomination, which has been built on the need to spread the gospel to all people. The negative numbers, which most denominational leaders say pose a genuine threat to the vitality of the SBC, have sent leaders on a search for causes and cures.

Some observers say it is no coincidence the downturn in baptisms started in 1980, when the convention became embroiled in the most serious controversy of its history. They say Southern Baptists have spent their energies confronting each other with charges of heresy instead of confronting the world with the claims of Christ.

Others say the "liberal" theology that prompted the controversy has been dragging down Baptist evangelism for years. They say some of their brethren are too accepting of other religious beliefs and have lost their vision of a world in need of Christ.

But researcher Orrin Morris is skeptical of such explanations. Morris, director of research for the SBC Home Mission Board, said generalizations about theological causes for the baptism decline are impossible to prove and convincing only to those who want to agree.

The decade-long slide in baptisms is due primarily to shifts in population that have deprived Southern Baptists of their traditionally fertile ground for the gospel, he said: "Two-thirds or even three-fourths of the drop (in baptisms) is because of demographics. This is the dominant factor. It overshadows everything else."

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According to Morris and other researchers, America is more adult, more urban and more ethnic than it was in the 1950s and 1960s, when Southern Baptists became accustomed to rapid growth.

Traditionally a denomination of rural whites who baptized many children, Southern Baptists now find their methods of winning people to faith in Christ less productive in a culture -- and a denomination -- dominated by urban adults. In 1970, 47 percent of Southern Baptists lived in metropolitan areas. By 1986, the figure rose to 59 percent.

Evangelism consultant Tom Lee points out preschoolers, children and youth used to make up two-thirds of SBC Sunday school rolls, providing a steady stream of candidates for baptism. In recent years, however, those enrollments have shifted. Now two-thirds are adults.

"Churches need to realize that their situations have changed in the past 10 years but their evangelism strategies have not," Lee, a consultant for the SBC Sunday School Board said last July.

As with most other institutions in society, churches have been heavily influenced by the Baby Boom generation. The offspring of postwar America crowded church nurseries in the '50s and early '60s, swelled youth groups in the '70s, and now packs the pews with young-adult church members. Yet many, if not most, Baby Boomers remain outside the church, forming the vast mission field of unchurched young adults.

Morris said the future portends more bad news for churches that rely on children and youth to increase their ranks. "From the 1980s to the mid-1990s, the teenage population will probably decrease 26 percent. That's a big, big blow," he said, for a denomination in which more than half the people baptized are under 18 years old.

But Bob Hamblin, Southern Baptists' top strategist for evangelism, won't blame the drop in baptisms on demographics, which he said is only one of several factors. He also is reluctant to blame theological laxity for the negative numbers.

"It's not a change in theology. There has been a change in attitude," said Hamblin, vice president for evangelism at the Home Mission Board. Southern Baptists have de-emphasized evangelism, he said: "We haven't done this theologically. We have done this practically."

Southern Baptist churches have busied themselves with a myriad of programs and emphases, diluting the attention given to evangelism, he said. Baptists also have become too sophisticated for evangelism, he added, saying, "We don't have the boldness to go out and witness one-on-one."

Southern Baptists don't need to revamp their evangelism strategies, Hamblin insisted, noting they will work today as well as ever. As evidence, he pointed to the 1986 "Good News America" nationwide simultaneous revivals, during which SBC churches recorded 105,000 professions of faith in a five-week period.

The failure in Baptist evangelism is not one of strategy but of commitment, he said: "Our spiritual commitment is not high enough. It was higher in the '50s. Coming out of the war, adults had experienced a real need for God." That attitude was replaced by complacency in the '60s and '70s, he added.

Lee gave a different reading to the halcyon days of the '50s, however: "Southern Baptists may not have been as evangelistic as we believed. There was no more commitment in the '50s, but it was easier then."

Baptists in the '50s did a good job of baptizing their own children and reaching their homogeneous neighborhoods, Lee explained. When relatives and neighbors grew up together and shared a common lifestyle, often centered around the church, it was easier to find an audience for the gospel.

With a strategy of "reach-teach-win-develop," Baptists concentrated on getting people enrolled and involved in Sunday school, where they would hear the gospel presented and where they often readily responded. But with a decentralized culture and a non-receptive population, the approach should be "reach-win-teach-develop," Lee said, emphasizing the need to take the gospel into the marketplace.

Hamblin said success in evangelism usually comes to a church with a "strong evangelistic preacher" that trains its members in personal soul-winning and maintains a prospect list.

Churches that lead the SBC in baptisms are providing good role models for evangelism, he said. But Lee and Morris both offered words of caution.

"I would look at who they are baptizing," Lee said. If a church is baptizing more adults than children and has a higher Sunday school enrollment than resident membership, it probably is setting a good pattern to follow, he said. But Morris warned the success of churches that baptize hundreds of people in a year may not be duplicable by other congregations that lack the location and population potential.

Lee suggested attention be given to adult evangelism. He said Southern Baptists must explore new approaches to reaching urban adults, such as cell groups and house churches.

The 1990s should find Southern Baptists using more sophisticated means of accumulating and using information, particularly with the help of computers, in order to locate and contact prospects, he added. Techniques from marketing will be borrowed for the church's use, he said.

In the long run, Lee said, the population trends in America may reverse themselves again. Another large generation of children may even emerge. For that reason, Lee doesn't recommend Southern Baptists abandon any of their tried-and-true outreach tools.

"I think things are going to turn around for us, but we can't wait," he said. "What about all these people in between?"

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Weatherford's Mother
Dies In Florida

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(Wmu)

Baptist Press
1/27/88

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (BP)--Doris Sansing Weatherford, 90, mother of Carolyn Weatherford, national executive director of Southern Baptist Woman's Missionary Union, died Jan. 26 in an Arcadia hospital.

Mrs. Weatherford was born in Union, Miss., Oct. 22, 1897, and had lived in Florida for more than 60 years. She was a member of First Baptist Church of Frostproof for 60 years and for the last two years was a member of Calvary Baptist Church, Arcadia.

Survivors include: three children, Parks Weatherford of Winter Park, Fla., Carolyn Weatherford, and Eileen Hall of Arcadia; a sister, Martha Lee Espey of Collinsville, Miss.; six grandchildren; and four great-grandchildren.

The family has asked that memorials be made to the WMU Centennial Thank Offering; Calvary Baptist Church, Arcadia, building fund; and First Baptist Church, Frostproof, building fund.

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Global Missions Encounter
Tops Three Decades of Work

By Frank Wm. White

F-SSB
Baptist Press
1/27/88

BRASILIA, Brazil (BP)--Southern Baptist missionary Mattie Lou Bible, perhaps more than anyone else, understood the historic significance of 253 American and Brazilian students joining together for Global Student Mission Encounter.

The Jan. 1-12 project involving the students in teams of five Brazilians and five Americans working at 26 sites throughout Brazil could be considered a high point of her 31 years in student work in Brazil.

When the project was initiated two years ago by two Brazilian Baptist agencies and the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission and Sunday School boards, Bible was designated coordinator in Brazil. At the time, she was a state convention director of student work in Belo Horizonte and national consultant in student work.

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Bible's responsibilities with student work ended with the project. Her focus now is on Menias Gerais Baptist Theological Seminary, a state convention school in Belo Horizonte, where she became president Dec. 6, 1986.

She considers the Global Student Missions Encounter a fitting end to her career with student work because it is the beginning of Brazilian Baptist efforts to establish a national program for student ministry.

"We're seeing the first fruits of what we want for student work in Brazil," she said.

For most of her 31 years in Brazil, Bible was the only person assigned specifically to Baptist student work. Three other Southern Baptist missionaries have joined her in the past four years.

Bible first worked in Recife coordinating student work throughout the state and moved to Belo Horizonte in a similar role in 1974.

Her foundation for student work was developed during four years as education and youth director at churches in Virginia and North Carolina.

Earlier, as a member of Baptist Girls in Action in Haughton, La., Bible felt God was calling her to foreign missions, she recalled: "I knew the Lord was telling me what I should do, but it didn't fit my plans to be a school teacher. I didn't want to do it."

During Girls in Action camp in Mandeville, La., she said she could not resist any longer. She charted her course toward being a missionary -- going to Louisiana College, a Baptist school in Pineville, then working for a year until she was old enough to enter the Woman's Missionary Union Training School which later merged with Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

Her path was blocked when during a medical exam required for missionary appointment a doctor identified what he considered a terminal heart problem. The diagnosis later was changed.

It was only a temporary delay. "I haunted the Foreign Mission Board to let me go. Now I know that time was very specific preparation for what I would be doing," she said.

Her family also resisted her early interest in missions although family members now are supportive, she said: "They were shocked when I went to seminary. They had never believed me when I said I was called to be a missionary."

Bible recalled her older sister saying during her first furlough, "You've served your time there; now it time for you to come home."

"It's easier for the one who goes than those who stay because you go to something. Those who stay only have the emptiness," Bible explained.

The past year has been especially busy for Bible with the seminary and plans for the mission project.

The year was the first time she has felt God placed her in a role for which she was totally unprepared, she said: "If you've never done something before, you don't know how to plan it. There are hundreds of little things to be done that no one has thought to explain how to do. The whole year has been a series of those things."

However, Bible observed she and the seminary both survived the first year, so she must have done some things right: "As I look over the year, I realize even keeping the seminary open was impossible. The Lord did it."

The seminary's budget was racked by 400 percent inflation and federally mandated raises for teachers of 100 percent and then 98 percent. Those problems led to tuition increases of 85 percent and 80 percent during the year. "You can't plan a budget and even think about sticking with it with problems like that," she said.

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As she planned for the second year, she said: "You can't be optimistic with inflation and other things you can't control the way they are. But I'm not anxious about it. As long as we follow the Lord, he will continue to bless our work."

Her goals for the seminary include raising the academic level of students and the quality of the education.

"We have very good teachers, but they are all part time. I want to see some endowed chairs. With that, we could have quality time rather than spare-time teaching," Bible said.

After 31 years building foundations for student work in Brazil, Bible's commitment continues in a changed role in a seminary setting.

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

CORRECTION: Please change the sixth graf of the 1/19/88 Baptist Press story titled "Jack Harwell Honored By Church, Georgians" to read:

Harwell agreed to do so, but the convention's executive committee, which controls hiring and firing of personnel, narrowly rejected allowing him to continue.

Thanks,
Baptist Press
