

# SOUTHERN BAPTIST EVANGELISTS OFFER HOPE IN THE FACE OF DECLINING BAPTISMS

*"But you be watchful in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry." II Timothy 4:5*

## A WHITE PAPER REPORT

For over seventy years, vocational evangelists and pastors in the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) have shared a common goal of reaching the lost and discipling the saved. Thousands of our churches have experienced the blessings and reaped the rewards of having experienced the preaching of God-called evangelists gifted with "drawing the net," and "gathering the harvest." The pastor and the evangelist have always been partners in obeying our Lord's instructions found in Matthew 28:19-20.

### I. THE CRISIS

#### A. Decline of Baptisms

The Southern Baptist Convention lost more than 200,000 members last year and baptized fewer than 300,000 new converts for the first time in 68 years, according to statistics compiled by LifeWay Christian Resources.

The loss of 204,409 members in 2015, followed on the heels of the loss of 236,467 the year before, the largest one-year drop in membership since the denomination started keeping records in 1881. Total membership of SBC churches now numbers 15,294,764, more than a million fewer than the 16.3 million reported in 2006. Paradoxically, it is interesting to note that the number of Southern Baptist Churches has grown for each of the last 17 years.

Baptisms, long regarded as a benchmark for denominational health, dropped by 10,000 to 295,212. It was the eighth decline in the last 10 years and the smallest number of baptisms since the 285,152 registered in 1947. The record year for baptisms was 445,725 in 1972. Southern Baptists reported 429,742 baptisms in 1980, the beginning of the decade of denominational controversy today known as the "conservative resurgence."

#### B. Neglect of the New Testament Office of Evangelist

##### *Facts Facing Evangelists Today*

Recently, the Billy Graham organization conducted a survey of evangelists in 23 different denominations that had vocational evangelists within their ranks. What they discovered is disturbing and enforces what has often been said within a large circle of full-time evangelists in Southern Baptist life.

- Only 4 in 10 evangelists could afford to do evangelism full time, while the other 60% had to find ways to supplement their income to support their families and meet legitimate needs.
- Only 8% worked part-time as a staff evangelist in a church.
- About one-half had an annual income of \$35,000 or less.
- The majority preached in towns of an average of 50,000 or less. (It is primarily rural churches use evangelists today.)
- Only 14% were spending most of their ministry time in cities of one-half million people or more. Because of this, the impact by evangelists on key cities is minimal. This is the opposite approach of the Apostle Paul, and could be a key factor in why our larger cities are becoming more pagan.
- The biggest challenges facing evangelists are how to deal with the loss of passion in the local church and how to encourage the local church to wisely select and make use of evangelists in the evangelistic task before them.
- When asked, "What is your greatest frustration?", the answer was, "Why does the local church not use evangelists?"
- When asked, "What is your greatest hold-back?", the answer was, "Finances."

While this survey should concern us, of more particular interest for Southern Baptists is that in 1975 we had over 600 evangelists, and today we have fewer than 100.

Billy Graham has warned us, *"I think the church through the years has been wrong in not recognizing the gift of the evangelist as much as the gift of the pastor or the gift of the teacher...the gift of the evangelist has often been neglected."* -- Billy Graham

## II. THE CHALLENGES

We have moved from face-to-face relationships to Facebook without relationships. We have a Snapchat superficial society, which after a few seconds, makes your relationships inaccessible. We have augmented reality, which alters one's current perception of a real world. With such rapid changes in the way we communicate, or more accurately do not communicate, the challenge is how to connect the claims of Christ to a culture where information is altered at best and erased at worst.

Is there still a place for public evangelistic gatherings which are commonly referred to as revivals, crusades, and festivals? Yes! Individual personal evangelism, media evangelism and public proclamation have been present in every spiritual awakening for the past 2,000 years. We may need to rename these events, but the public proclamation of the Good News has endured through the ages. Special evangelistic events are needed perhaps now more than ever.

This is where God-called vocational evangelists can assist and support pastors in their evangelistic endeavors to reach the unsaved and strengthen the church. Southern Baptist Evangelists stand ready and more than willing to serve every pastor in the SBC in a variety of Harvest Events. While our vocational evangelists are trusted with the proclamation of the gospel many of them have expertise in areas such as international missions, financial, medical and family issues as well as other topics which are relevant to the church today. Harvest Events, whether corporate gatherings such as revivals and festivals, or affinity events always produce eternal results if proper

preparations are made in advance. Mass evangelism is not a thing of the past, but refocusing its expressions will call for new methods.

### III. THE CLARIFICATIONS

It is suggested that the following recommendations be considered by both the pastors and evangelists in the SBC:

- 1) Develop a partnership between pastors, their churches and evangelists.
- 2) Schedule quarterly Harvest Events.
- 3) Develop creative and innovative evangelistic events which involve multiple churches, and/or the entire association on an annual basis.
- 4) Use evangelists in witnessing and discipleship training.
- 5) Create partnerships between strong churches and financially challenged churches with low baptisms and sponsor an evangelist who can lead a Harvest Event.

### SUMMARY

We are now in a creative time of envisioning the future pattern and structure of the public evangelistic gathering. A number of our evangelists are already using online resources in various ways to reach both Christian gatherings and unreached people groups in numerous international countries. Whether these are valid forms of public proclamation is not the question. Not using evangelists and scheduling evangelistic events has contributed to our present-day crisis of declining baptisms. The concern is developing the forms which are most effective. *As has been proven in recent years, the decline in revivals and other Harvest Events is in direct correlation to the decline in baptisms in the SBC.*

Church planting, the current emphasis in our Convention, has been effective in increasing the number of new churches, but has not proven effective in increasing the number of new converts. Church planting is not evangelism in place of soul-winning; church planting is the result of evangelistic soul-winning. As is recorded in Acts 2:47, the Lord added to the church only after salvation took place. *Church planting as the only growth strategy of the SBC also neglects the evangelistic needs of our 47,000 existing churches.*

There is a desperate need for evangelistic expository preaching followed by an invitation given clearly, honestly, courteously, urgently, expectantly, and with complete dependence on the Holy Spirit. The Vocational Evangelists in the SBC are available to assist the pastors in drawing the net whatever the Harvest Event.

Is there reason for concern about the lack of personal and corporate evangelism in the SBC? Absolutely! Is it too late to reverse these downward trends? Absolutely not! Vocational evangelists in the SBC are eager to serve any pastor, anywhere, at any anytime. Together, under the anointing of the Holy Spirit, we can once again hear the voices of those who have been cut to the heart cry out as on the Day of Pentecost with the question, "Brothers, what must we do?" Acts 2:37.

*"God, rekindle a fire within your servants that You might ignite those who hear Your Word."*

Visit [WWW.SBCEVANGELIST.ORG](http://WWW.SBCEVANGELIST.ORG) to find your Southern Baptist Evangelists.

Submitted May 17, 2018 by Jerry Drace, Convener and Editor of White Paper Report at Evangelism Summit '18 in Jackson, Tennessee. Dr. Hal Poe, Consultant, Charles Colson Professor of Faith and Culture, Union University, Jackson, Tennessee.

The following evangelists were present at Evangelism Summit '18: Gary Bowlin, David Burton, Keith Cook, Jerry Drace, Phil Glisson, Michael Gott, Richard Hamlet, Ron Herrod, Jay Lowder, Glenn Sheppard, Frank Shivers, Bob Smith, David Stockwell, Sammy Tippit and Marion Warren.