

HISTORY SPEAKS

To Hard Questions Baptists Ask

The year 2009 is the 400th anniversary of the founding of the Baptist tradition. To help celebrate this big year, the Baptist History and Heritage Society has created a new 24-article series, HISTORY SPEAKS.

Readers of these articles are urged to print copies for themselves and even to duplicate copies for distribution and study. Please include the following permission statement: "Used by permission of the Baptist History and Heritage Society and its website (www.baptisthistory.org), Atlanta, Georgia. Because the articles are produced by free-thinking Baptists, the BH&HS staff and board may or may not agree with the content of each article."

The Apparent Decline in Evangelism by Baptists in the United States of America

William M. Pinson, Jr.

Five Baptists, hauled into court, are charged with a crime. The charge? "These men are great disturbers of the peace, they cannot meet a man upon the road, but they must ram a text of scripture down his throat." That was in Virginia in 1768, a time when many Baptists suffered for sharing the gospel. Not all Baptists of the past were faithful in evangelism, but Baptists were known as an evangelistic people.

What caused these Baptists to faithfully share the gospel in spite of persecution? For them evangelism was a necessary ingredient of Baptist life, based on the beliefs that comprise Baptist distinctives: The Bible is the sole written authority for faith and practice, and the Bible emphasizes evangelism. Jesus is Lord and Jesus declared that his disciples were to be his witnesses. Salvation comes only by a voluntary faith response to Jesus as Lord and Savior, and believer priests have a responsibility to encourage such faith prayerfully.

Due to the sacrificial struggle of Baptists and others, religious freedom finally came to America. No longer are persons arrested for evangelism. But are the Baptists of today as faithful in evangelistic effort as those of early America, or has there been a decline? The question is not as easy to answer as it might seem. For example, how is evangelism to be measured? By effort? By effectiveness? Neither of these provides a clear picture of Baptist evangelism.

Knowledgeable observers note fewer efforts once considered keys to evangelism, such as revival meetings, use of vocational evangelists, door-to-door-visitation, evangelistic preaching, passionate evangelistic invitations in worship services, teaching the plan of salvation, witness training of church members, and distribution of tracts. On the other hand, Baptists blanket the nation with evangelistic preaching on radio and television, utilize the Internet for sharing the gospel, promote their faith through direct mail, and start many new churches.

Yet, evangelistic effectiveness, usually measured by number of baptisms and growth in church membership, seems to be waning.* Statistics indicate fewer baptisms both in total number and per church member. Baptist church membership has plateaued in numbers and is shrinking as a percentage of the total population. However, the correlation between statistics on baptism and evangelism is difficult to interpret. Fewer Baptist churches today submit their annual church reports than in the past. What might appear as a decline in the number of baptisms

may in fact be a decline in the number of churches reporting baptisms. Also, some persons are converted due to Baptist evangelistic efforts but choose not to be baptized.

On the other hand, baptismal statistics do not truly reflect evangelistic effectiveness. For example, some persons may be baptized who are not truly evangelized, that is born again. And numerous individuals who are already born again join Baptist churches from other denominations each year, are baptized, and counted in baptismal statistics.

The evidence, while indefinite, indicates a decline in evangelism, although, of course, this is not true of all individuals and churches. **The following causes for such decline are often suggested:**

Individual Baptists—apathy, inadequate knowledge about basic biblical teachings, fear of rejection, embarrassment about sharing because of own unchristian lifestyle, and lack of conviction that salvation is only through faith in Christ.

Churches—lack of strong evangelistic preaching, slackening of evangelistic emphasis, absence of personal example by pastors in evangelistic effort, little training of members in evangelism, and failure to develop new methods in light of changes in society.

Denomination—lack of focus on evangelism, conflict between various factions in the denomination, and weakened prayer emphasis.

Trends in society—the view that all religions are essentially alike, a super-tolerant attitude that condemns evangelism as judgmental, and urbanization with its accompanying difficulty of visiting lost and unchurched persons.

How can we stop the decline? A great spiritual awakening, of course, is the best hope. In the meantime, the following are often mentioned as remedies: concentrated prayer for spiritual awakening, special denominational emphases on evangelism, a passion for evangelism by churches, more evangelistic sermons and personal witnessing, increased church member instruction on why and how to share the faith, teaching the biblical imperative of evangelism, and a dependence on the power of the Holy Spirit.

*Clay Price, a professional statistician, analyzed baptismal statistics at the request of the author of this article. He can be contacted at clay.price@bgct.org.

William M. Pinson Jr. is Executive Director Emeritus of the Baptist General Convention of Texas.