

Southern Baptists, an Unregenerate Denomination (Part 1)

By Jim Elliff



"How are you doing?"

"Pretty well, under the circumstances."

"What are the circumstances?"

"Well, I have a very effective arm. It moves with quite a bit of animation. But then I have my bad leg."

"What's wrong with it?"

"I guess it's paralyzed. At least it doesn't do much except twitch once a week or so. But that's nothing compared with the rest of me."

"What's the problem?"

"From all appearances, the rest is dead. At least it stinks and bits of flesh are always falling off. I keep it well covered. About all that's left beyond that is my mouth, which fortunately works just fine. How about you?"

Like the unfortunate person above, the Southern Baptist Convention has a name that it is alive, but is in fact, mostly dead (Rev. 3:1). Regardless of the wonderful advances in our commitment to the Bible, the recovery of our seminaries, etc., a closer look reveals a denomination that is more like a corpse than a fit athlete. In an unusual way, our understanding of this awful reality provides the most exciting prospects for the future—if we will act decisively.

The Facts

Although the Southern Baptists claim 16,287,494 members, on average only 6,024,289 people (guests and non-member children included), a number equal to only 37% of the membership number, show up for their church's primary worship meeting (usually Sunday morning). This is according to the Strategic Information and Planning department of the Sunday School Board (2004 statistics). If your church is anything like normal, and is not brand new, your statistics are probably similar. In other words, if you have 200 in attendance on Sunday morning, you likely have 500-600 or even more on your roll. Many churches have an even worse record.

Discerning who among us is regenerate is not an exact science, but a closer look at these numbers will at least alert us to the fact that *most* Southern Baptists must certainly be dead spiritually. That is so, unless, of course, you claim that there is no difference between a believer and a non-believer.

In the average church you can cut the 37% Sunday morning attendance by about two-thirds or more when counting those interested in a Sunday evening service, or other gatherings held in addition to the principal meeting of the church. In 1996, the last time the SBC kept these statistics, the number of Sunday evening attenders was equal to only 12.3% of the membership (in churches that had an evening meeting). One might ask what makes us claim that the rest are Christians, if they involve themselves with God's people only on such a minimal, surface level? How are they any different from the people who attend the liberal church down the street—the "church" where the gospel is not even preached?

And remember that the numbers of those attending include many non-member children and guests, often making up a third of the congregation's main meeting attendance. When all factors are considered, these figures suggest that nearly 90% of Southern Baptist church members appear to be little different from the "cultural Christians" who populate other mainline denominations.

To make matters worse, we tell a lot more people that they are true Christians (because they prayed a prayer sincerely) than we can convince to be baptized. Our largest pizza supper may bring in a hundred new "converts," but we will likely get only a few of those on the roll. *After that*, the percentages that I have been mentioning kick in. In other words, if you compare all who we say have become Christians through our evangelistic efforts, to those who actually *show signs* of being regenerate, we should be red-faced. In the Assembly of God's 1990s "Decade of Harvest," out of the 3.5 million supposedly converted, they showed a net gain of only 5 new attenders for every 100 recorded professions. When one considers all of our supposed converts, including those who refuse to follow Christ in baptism and who never join our churches, our numbers are much the same. Doesn't anybody see that there is a serious problem here?

Let me illustrate in rounded figures by looking at some of the churches where I have preached as a guest speaker. Each could be any Baptist church in any city. In one church, with 7,000 on the active roll, there were only 2000 in attendance on Sunday morning, and a mere 600-700 on Sunday evening. When you account for those attenders who are not members of this flagship church (i.e. guests and non-member children), you have about 1500 actual members coming in the morning and 500 or so in the evening. Where are the 5,500 members who are missing on Sunday mornings? Where are the 6,500 who are missing in the evening?

Another church had 2,100 on the roll, with 725 coming on Sunday morning. Remove guests and non-member children and the figure drops to 600 or less. Only about a third of that number came out on Sunday evening, representing less than 10% of the membership. Yet another church had 310 on the roll with only 100 who attended on Sunday morning. Only 30-35, or approximately 10%, came to the evening worship service.

These are all considered fine churches. All have an extremely competent level of leadership and vision. Some shut-ins and those who are sick, out of town, or in the military, certainly affect the figures *a little*. But those who are justifiably absent are not enough to alter the bleakness of the picture, especially when we remember that these numbers represent people who have been baptized and have publicly declared their allegiance to God and the Body of Christ. Even if you generously grant that the 37% are all true believers (an estimation that most pastors would say is way off the mark), one still has a church membership that is more dead than alive. If we are honest, we might have to ask ourselves, "Do Southern Baptists believe in a regenerate membership?"

Missing Christians are No Christians

What do these facts and figures, as general as they are, suggest? First, they reveal that most of the people on our rolls give little evidence that they love the brethren—a clear sign of being unregenerate (1 Jn. 3:14). It is impossible to believe that anything like real familial affection exists in the hearts of people who do not come at all, or who only nominally check in on Sunday morning as a cultural exercise. Love is the greatest mark of a genuine believer (1 Jn.3:14-19). Attendance *alone* does not guarantee that anyone is an authentic believer, but "forsaking the assembling," is a serious sign of the unregenerate heart. The phrase: "They went out from us, because they were never of us" (1 Jn. 2:19) may have doctrinal overtones, but it nonetheless represents many on our membership rolls.

Second, these numbers suggest that most of those who do not attend (or who only come when it is convenient), are more interested in themselves than God. To put it in Paul's words, they are "fleshly-minded" and not "spiritually-minded" (Rom. 8: 5-9). The atmosphere that most pleases them is that of the world and not God. They can stand as much of God as makes them feel better about themselves, and they find a certain carnal security in "belonging" to a local church. But beyond that, they will politely resist getting involved. They *use* the church, but are not really a part of it. For some, the extent of what they can take is an Easter service now and then; for others it is an occasional sterile (and somewhat Pharisaical) trip to church on appropriate Sunday mornings

as fits into their schedule. But their apathy towards regular and faithful church attendance betrays their true affections. The fact is, you do what you love to do.

Third, the numbers indicate that some people have joined other denominations and our churches have not kept up with their movements—a sign of inadequate pastoral oversight and the built-in deficiencies of the "inactive membership" concept. I'm quite certain Paul never dreamed of "inactive membership." Embarrassingly, some left on the rolls are dead—physically! It goes without saying that a dead person is about as inactive as one could be! But others, though presumably alive physically, have disappeared without a trace. I believe it was our beloved Dr. Roy Fish of SWBTS who said, "Even the FBI could not find some of them." Yet, if we want to claim them as members, we are responsible to keep up with them.

All of these people have "prayed the prayer" and "walked the aisle." All have been told that they are Christians. But for most, old things have not really passed away, and new things have not come. Most are not new creatures in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17). In too many cases, obvious signs of an unregenerate heart can be found, such as bitterness, long-term adultery, fornication, greed, divisiveness, covetousness, etc. These are "professing believers" that the Bible says are deceived. "Do not be deceived" the Bible warns us concerning such people (see 1 Cor.6:9-11; Gal. 5:19-21; 6: 7-8; Eph. 5:5-6; Titus 1:16; 1 Jn. 3:4-10; etc.).

Jesus indicated that there is a good soil that is receptive to the gospel seed so as to produce a fruit-bearing plant, but that the "rocky ground" believer only *appears* to be saved. The latter shows immediate joy, but soon withers away (Mt. 13:6, 21). This temporary kind of faith (which is not saving faith, see 1 Cor.15:1-2) is rampant among Southern Baptists. In *The Baptist Faith and Message* we say we believe that saving faith is persistent to the end. We say we believe in the preservation and perseverance of the saints (once saved, always persevering). In other words, if a person's faith does not persevere, then what he possessed was something other than saving faith.

In John 2:23-25 Jesus was the center-piece for what turned out to be a mass evangelism experience in which a large number of people "believed" in Him. Yet He did not entrust Himself to even one of them because "he knew their hearts." Is it possible that we have taken in millions of such "unrepenting believers" whose hearts have not been changed? I say that we have. Our denomination, as much as we may love it, is on the main, *unregenerate*. Even if you double, triple, or *quadruple* my assessment of how many are true believers, we still have a gigantic problem. It is naive to believe otherwise.

There are those who would say that such people are "carnal Christians" and don't deserve to be thought of as unregenerate. It is true that the Corinthian believers (about whom this phrase was used; see 1 Cor. 3:1-3) acted "like mere men" in their party spirit. Christians can commit any sin short of that which is unpardonable.

Undoubtedly, however, Paul did suspect that some of the Corinthians were unbelievers, for he later warns them about such a possibility in 2 Cor.12:20-13:5. A long-term and unrepentant state of carnality, is, after all, the very description of the unregenerate (Rom. 8:5-14, 1 Jn. 3:4-10, etc.). In calling some people "carnal" Paul did not mean to imply that he was accepting as Christian a lifestyle that he clearly describes elsewhere as unbelieving. He wrote, in the same letter: "Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God. Do not be deceived" (1 Cor. 6:9-11, etc.). Apparently there were some, even then, who were deceived into thinking that an unrighteous man or woman who professes faith in Christ could really be a Christian!

Is Follow-up the Problem?

A great mistake is made by blaming the problem on poor follow-up. In many churches there is every intention and effort given to follow-up, yet still the poor numbers persist. One church followed up "by the book," seeking to disciple people who had been told they were new converts during the crusade of an internationally-known evangelist. The report of the pastor in charge was that none of them wanted to talk about how to grow as a Christian. He said, "In fact, they ran from us!" I have known some churches to go to extreme efforts to disciple new believers. We must do this. Yet, like the others, they generally have marginal success. They have learned to accept the fact that people who profess to have become Christians often have to be talked into going further, and that many, if not most, simply will not bother. Authentic new believers can *always* be followed up, however, because they have the Spirit by which they cry, "Abba Father" (Rom. 8:15). They have been given love for the brethren, and essential love for the beauty and authority of the Word of God. But you *cannot* follow-up on a spiritually dead person. Being dead, he has no interest in growth.

It was the preaching of regeneration, with an explanation of its discernible marks, that was the heart of the Great Awakening. J. C. Ryle, in writing of the eighteenth century revival preachers, said that they never for a moment believed that there was any true conversion if it was not accompanied by increasing personal holiness. Such content was the staple of the greatest of awakening preaching throughout the history of revival. Only such a powerful cannon blast of truth could rock the bed of those asleep in Zion.

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