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God's Country?

Just How Big Are the Baptists?

by Barry Friedman

There is a joke in which a man dies and goes to heaven and is met by St. Peter, who offers to show him around.

As St. Peter walks with him down a long hallway, the man sees a group of people, praying in a room. "Who are they?" he asks, to which St. Peter replies, "Oh, they're the Catholics." A few minutes later, the man sees another group, also praying in another room, and once again inquires as to who they are. "Those are the Jews," he is told. He sees more groups, all praying in rooms off this long hallway, and is told he is seeing Methodists and Seventh Day Adventists and Presbyterians. The man then comes across the final room, where he sees yet another group of men and women in prayer. "Who are they?" the man asks. "Shhh," says St. Peter, "they're the Baptists. They think they're the only ones here."

There are approximately 34-million Baptists in the United States, making up almost 17 percent of the population--and it only seems like they all reside in Oklahoma. In fact, Oklahoma has almost one million Baptists, almost 30 percent of the state's population.

And even though Oklahoma ranks 27th in U.S. population, it ranks 7th in the nation in total number of Baptists and has the third highest percentage of any state, next to Mississippi and Alabama.

To put this in perspective, Oklahoma has more Baptists than Montana, Delaware, South Dakota, North Dakota, Alaska, Vermont, and Wyoming have residents.

With such a base, Baptists can and do play a major role in the politics and culture in many southern states—a role they would say is necessary to combat the secularism and humanism of modern American culture.

"Religion," says Dale Blackwood, interim executive director of the Tulsa Baptist Metro

Association, "should touch everything you do."

Historically, part of the strength and appeal of the Baptists in America has been their lack of ambivalence in matters both ecumenical and cultural—no drinking, no dancing, and no getting into heaven unless you do it their way.

That, however, may be changing.

"Baptists are as individual a group as you'll find," says Blackwood in defense. "Are there Baptists who drink? Of course. But generally speaking, from the pulpit, it is preached that the best way is to be a teetotaler."

Baptists believe that the local church is the cornerstone of all religious faith, meaning that the faith does not have a hierarchy, as does the Catholic Church. Furthermore, Baptist churches are totally autonomous from one another; as such, any cooperation between them is voluntary. The absence of this hierarchy may be another appeal of the Baptists. Rather than a flawed lay person, according to Dr. Vernon C. Lyons, pastor of Ashburn Baptist, Chicago's largest independent Baptist Church, Baptists believe that Christ and only Christ is the Head of the Church.

"There is no man who has the oversight of Baptist churches," he says. "Baptists have no denomination in the sense of an organization that controls local congregations. Various Protestant denominations have creeds, catechisms and assorted doctrinal standards. Baptists hold to the Bible alone."

Further, according to Lyons, "Protestant groups look to some human being as their founder, often even taking their name from a man. The Lutherans hark back to Luther; the Reformed look to John Calvin; The Presbyterians were rounded by John Knox; and The Methodists openly acknowledge John Wesley as their founder.

"It is impossible to find any one man who gave rise to Baptist churches, he says. Rather, if we would name human founders, we must look back to Peter, Paul, James, and John."

Blackwood agrees: "We didn't come out of a protestant movement, but more of a separatist movement."

Shari Goodwin, communication director of Boston Avenue Methodist Church, takes some

issue with this distinction.

“Surely,” she says, “somebody somewhere must have started something.”

Baptists, too, differ from Protestants in birthplace. Lutherans came from Germany, the Reformed from Switzerland and the Netherlands, the Presbyterians from Scotland, Episcopalians from England, but Baptists, Lyons says immodestly, would have to give Palestine as their place of origin.

“In the apostolic church, only those who became believers, those who received the Word of God and who had repented of their sins, were baptized and received as church members,” says Lyons. “There is no automatic or formalistic membership in apostolic churches or in Baptist churches today.”

As such, infants, who cannot yet make a conscious decision to repent or receive the Word, cannot be considered true Baptists until they are grown enough to do so.

Most Baptist scholars agree that the Bible does not spell out when this *age of accountability* occurs.

This automatic membership, obviously, is commonplace in most religions—people are as a matter of rite “born” Catholic, Presbyterian, and Lutheran. As to the act of baptism itself, the Catholic Church baptizes children and adults, assumes each individual has a personal relationship with Christ with the assistance of the Church and adult repentance of sins is facilitated by frequent reception of the Sacraments, through the Sacrifice of the Mass and specifically, the Sacrament of Reconciliation (a.k.a. “Confession”).

Father Josh, associate priest of Christ the King Catholic Church of Tulsa, says that for the sheer numbers of Baptists, he doesn’t see much friction between the two churches. “Being a minority faith in the community here has always increased the sense of community we have as Catholic. I don’t see it as a competition, but it does highlight the need to work together. In fact, I see most people trying to be understanding of each other.”

Catholicism, with more than almost 51 million members in the U.S. alone, is the most popular religion in America (assuming the various Protestant faiths are viewed separately).

Historically, Baptists have felt that Catholics, by nature of their church structure, especially with their allegiance to the Pope, have strayed furthest from the message of Christ. It is a complicated issue, but perhaps the most telling difference between them is that Baptists believe in a theory known as *Sola Scriptura*, meaning the Bible is the sole rule of faith, while Catholics believe that the Word of God is transmitted through Sacred Scripture, Sacred Tradition, and is interpreted by the teaching authority of the Church.

"The difference is theology," says Blackwood, diplomatically. "We don't believe in a church government or power of priests."

Baptists, he reiterates, believe that the Word of God is limited to the Bible.

Hetero Sects

Southern Baptists make up the majority of the Baptist population. The Southern Baptist Convention is the second largest religious body in the United States next to the Catholic Church (followed by Methodists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Pentecostals, Episcopalians, Jews, Mormons, Church of Christ believers, and Jehovah's Witnesses.)

The Southern Baptist Convention, due to the many numbers of small congregations, has the most number of church communities (parishes), though, more than 37,000—even more than the Catholic Church.

The Southern Baptist Convention was formed in 1845 when it split from Northern Baptists because of Northern Baptists' anti-slavery stance.

Since 1979, the SBC has been split internally between Moderate and Conservative (also called "Fundamentalist" or "Inerrant") parties. With a slightly higher number of delegates and, more importantly, greater political unity amongst themselves, the Conservatives are usually the "voice" that the rest of America hears.

In response, moderates have formed multiple sub-groups. Like many religions, Baptists have their in-fighting, but unlike many other faiths, an in-fight in the Baptist church often means a new Baptist church down the street.

A look at the SBC Yellow pages shows 10 different denominations—or subgroups--of Baptist organizations, from Missionary to Southern to ABA to Free Will, meaning there

isn't uniformity among the Baptists.

"There's a slight difference in theology," says Blackwood. "Southern Baptists believe if one is truly saved, one can never fully lose salvation; Free Will Baptists, for instance, believe that it is possible to lose it. Other churches started regionally, but the majority difference is how they go about their mission."

To explain the popularity of Baptists, Blackwood says the fact that people are asked to make a conscious decision attracts a more committed worshipper. Every one has co-access.

"Baptists believe we are all equally standing in front of God."

The percentage of Baptists in America hasn't grown in the past 10 years. But even here there's disagreement--not only why it's occurring, but if, in fact, it even is. Some outside the Baptist church believe the percentage decline proves the SBC's practices are turning off converts; others, especially those within the SBC, maintain there's no drop off at all—just shoddy and inaccurate reporting practices from thousands of its small churches.

Still, in 1998 the SBC reported a world total of 15,729,356 members (almost all in the U.S. and all in five Southern states: Texas, Georgia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Alabama.)

Spreading the Word

Since Baptists are not "born" into the religion, the church actively evangelizes. In 1999, the SBC convention actively pursued the conversion among Jews. A "prayer guide" published and distributed by the Southern Baptist International Mission Board in Richmond, Va., explains the Jewish high holy days, gives sketches of Jewish people in different parts of the world and offers suggestions on how to pray for Jewish people. The guide used urges Baptists "to pray for Jewish individuals you know by name."

What rankled Jewish groups, as much for what they felt was a profound disrespect and disregard on behalf of the Baptists, was the further indignation of pursuing this recruitment drive during the Jewish High Holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

According to Blackwood, the resolution was nothing new—it's what Baptists have always been doing-- but any time a public announcement is made, it gets noticed. He did add,

though, "I don't know the statement needed to be made in the first place."

"Saying that to folks who resent it, is not a pleasant task," he says, laughing.

"Baptists have a right to believe what they believe," said Mark Briskman, Southwest regional director for the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith. "But we find this offensive. It shows an element of arrogance because they are specifically targeting Jews."

Putting it more bluntly, Abraham Foxman, director of the Anti-Defamation League, said at the time. "To say you are against anti-Semitism and at the same time work toward the non-existence of the Jewish people is very, very ironic."

Although the question of whether "being Jewish" is ethno-cultural or tied to religious practice continues to be hotly debated amongst Jews themselves.

The relationship between Jews and Baptists has always been a complicated one, owing in part to the Baptists' strong support of Israel and its fight against anti-Semitism, while they aggressively evangelize Jews.

Locally, Rabbi Charles P. Sherman of Temple Israel takes a more ecumenical view.

"Look, there are Baptists and then there are *Baptists*," he said, further explaining that there are religious elements of all faiths, including his own, that are intolerant or heavy-handed.

"When Rev. Bailey Smith, at the time the head of the Southern Baptist Convention said that God did not hear the prayers of Jews, Rev. Warren Hultgren, my dear friend, who was then head of the First Baptist Church here in Tulsa, said in front of his congregation the following morning that Rev. Smith did not speak for him, and that no human could possibly know who God does or doesn't hear.

"He disclaimed his own president. And in case you weren't in church that day, Reverend Hultgren reprinted his sermon distancing himself from Smith's comments in his church newsletter."

In the 1988 text of that newsletter, Hultgren does in fact distance himself from Smith's comments, stating, "*There is no reason to believe that God doesn't hear sincere*

prayers."

In the same editorial, Hultgren states, *"It will be years (if ever) before we will repair the hurt that has been caused by an unnecessary remark. God loves Jew and Gentile, a slave and a free person, male and female with equal compassion. We should desire to share God's love through our lives with everyone . . . not alienate, estrange or turn against anyone, even those with whom we have some differences.*

"I called both Rabbis in our city to apologize and to indicate that no one person speaks for a whole group."

"And he did, too," says Sherman with admiration. "Keep in mind: this man [Hultgren] is a Southern Baptist, as are the people who spend thousands of dollars targeting Jews for conversion, as are millions of others who fall in between these views.

"If the only Jew you know is a schmuck," he says, bluntly, "then you're likely to think all Jews are schmucks. All of this is to say that you should be careful not to stereotype any religious group," including, he seems to be saying, prejudices you might have about the Baptists.

When the announcement was made to target Jews for conversion, Sherman and Hultgren's successor, Sam Shaw, had a Town Hall Meeting of sorts.

"We invited members of both congregations," says Sherman, "probably over a thousand people came—and we sat on his stage and asked each other questions. We promised we were not going to pull punches. And we didn't. He made clear to me again that, while the great commission for Christians was to share their faith—something he was not apologizing for—*how* that was done was the most important thing. It can be done respectfully or arrogantly."

"From stupid statements (like the conversion pronouncement), in my opinion, good things can occur," says Sherman, who believes some of the dialogue that now exists between faiths in Tulsa has to do with necessity.

"Once you get to know people from different faiths, once you get to know and like them, see that they're good fathers and people, it's tough to say that they will fry in hell for not believing as you do. Many people are saying, 'I'll leave that up to God.'

"Twenty-five years ago, you could make the assumption in most Oklahoma public schools that most everyone was a white Christian. You can't say that anymore."

(On a personal note, toward the end of my phone interview with Mr. Blackwood, he asked what church I attended, assuming just that. When I told him I didn't, and that I was Jewish, the conversation moved on to other matters.)

Fire and Brimstone, Still

Blackwood maintains that Baptists have gotten a bum rap over the years as being close-minded and bigoted; still, the SBC has a way of annually putting its collective foot in its mouth.

During the SBC 1992 convention in St. Louis, the Rev. Jerry Vines, former president of the SBC and pastor of First Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Florida, said "Today, people are saying all religions are the same. They would have us believe Islam is just as good as Christianity. But I'm here to tell you, ladies and gentlemen, that Islam is not as good as Christianity.

"Christianity was founded by the virgin-born Lord Jesus Christ. Islam was founded by Mohammed, a demon-possessed pedophile who had 12 wives, and his last one was a nine-year-old girl. And I will tell you, Allah is not Jehovah either," Vines continued. "Jehovah's not going to turn you into a terrorist that'll try to bomb people and take the lives of thousands and thousands of people."

At its most recent annual meeting, The Southern Baptist Convention once again revisited the conversion issue when it encouraged members to reach out compassionately to gays with a message about how Christianity can help them become heterosexual. The group also approved resolutions denouncing same-sex marriage and prejudice against Jews; expressed concern for people with AIDS (while rejecting the notion of distributing condoms to prevent its spread); reiterated its support for the U.S.-led war on Iraq; asserted its members' right to proclaim Christianity as the only path to salvation; and complained that its members have been unfairly portrayed as "intolerant and even dangerous because of our commitment to Christ."

"It's not that we think our way is best," Blackwood says. "It's just that the Bible teaches us that Christ is the answer. It is incumbent on us to teach that. We would be failing in our beliefs if we didn't. Our goal is to minister to people and bring Christ to people. We

wouldn't consider ourselves successful until we're at one hundred percent."

So, are Baptists the only ones in heaven?

"No, sir," said Blackwood. "There are many Protestant faiths bringing people to Christ. We don't feel like we're the only ones."

And what about the Catholics?

"I'm not getting into that," he said.

I didn't even ask about the Jews.