

The Conference of Southern Baptist Evangelists **Celebrating Half a Century of Soul Winning**

by David Roach

What would you think of a church that completely ignored God's gift of teachers?



What if that church never listened to the Word of God preached in a worship service, heard the Word of God discussed in a Sunday School class, or allowed a seasoned leader to guide it through some of the Bible's deep truths in a discipleship training session?

Most Southern Baptists would call such a church spiritually deprived and demand that it begin to use God's provision of teachers for the sake of its spiritual health.

Yet, according to Brian Fossett, an evangelist from Dalton, Georgia, many churches are making just as deadly a mistake by neglecting the gift of the evangelist, and they don't even realize what they're missing out on.

A God-called evangelist can help revive a church by harvesting souls for Christ and encouraging weary leadership, he said.

"Not using an evangelist is like not opening a gift on Christmas morning," Fossett said. "It's like not using a gift that God has given you to help the church, to help you grow, to help you achieve what you want to achieve."

Despite the widespread neglect of this important office, one group of Southern Baptists is celebrating half a century of promoting and exercising the gift of an evangelist. The Conference of Southern Baptist Evangelists (COSBE) will celebrate its fiftieth anniversary at this year's SBC annual meeting in Indianapolis, and the group hopes God will use the occasion to reawaken Southern Baptists to what God can do when a willing church partners with a faithful evangelist.

The anniversary celebration will kick off June 6-7 at the Indianapolis Convention Center with COSBE's annual retreat and include the induction of the first class into the Evangelists Hall of Faith, a tribute to evangelists who have dedicated years of service to the task of soul winning.

On Sunday, June 8 COSBE will host a worship service featuring preaching from evangelists Tony Nolan, Junior Hill, and Jamey Ragle and music by Christian recording artists New Song. That night Ragle and Nolan will participate in an area-wide youth worship service, in which they hope to see three hundred to five hundred teens saved.

"We've got a lot of young guys that are coming into it (COSBE), and we praise God for that very greatly because we want the next fifty, if Jesus tarries, to be just as effective as the last fifty," Fossett, who serves as COSBE's president, said.

Hill became a vocational evangelist in 1967 and said he has enjoyed the benefits of relationships with fellow evangelists since day one.

"There is a great value to a network of fellow evangelists," Hill said. "It gives fellowship. It gives some kind of identity to one another. It kind of binds us together in a ministry of sameness."

One important benefit of belonging to COSBE is having a network of accountability, Hill said. He noted that the group has a membership statement expressing moral and doctrinal standards to which all members are expected to hold themselves. Any report of an evangelist violating those standards results in investigation by COSBE's leadership.

Hill urged Southern Baptists to celebrate COSBE's fiftieth anniversary because it presents an opportunity to show Baptists that there is still a future for mass evangelism.

"Baptisms have declined, and the reaching of young people is at an alarming low," Hill said. "And I think it's really a significant thing that this milestone is being commemorated because it tells the Convention that there are men and women out there who still want to be used and want to help to reach the lost."

Hill acknowledged that evangelists will have to change their methods in years to come in order to remain effective in contemporary culture. Specifically he said evangelists must learn to be innovative and effective in shorter meetings because it is becoming increasingly difficult to convince non-Christians to attend a revival lasting from Sunday through Wednesday.

Hill holds many one-day "harvest meetings" himself, in which a church focuses on inviting lost people for both a Sunday morning and a Sunday evening evangelistic message. He stressed, however, that churches should still use longer evangelistic meetings when appropriate for their contexts.

Regardless of the length of a meeting, the most important aspect is presenting the unchanging Gospel to sinners, Hill said.

"I still believe that the preaching of the Gospel is the power of God unto salvation," he said.

Fossett also acknowledged that evangelists face challenges in the years to come. One challenge is teaching churches to cut back on the number of activities they sponsor in order to focus on a few activities that are truly important to God, he said.

"When an evangelist comes in, it's like a realignment for the church, just like realigning a car. You get your focus back on what it should be on, and that's souls and people and harvest and going out and making a difference in the community where God has planted you," Fossett said, adding, "We have filled our calendars with good things and not God things."

Another challenge facing evangelists is the perception among some pastors that an evangelist will bring unnecessary chaos to a church and even cause doctrinal disturbances, Fossett said. But faithful evangelists will never preach unbiblical doctrine, he said, and many churches are so dead in terms of soul winning that they need to take a risk for Jesus.

"A lot of times you feel like saying, 'Friend, you've not baptized anybody in fifteen years. What level of dead are you worried about them pushing you to?' Evangelism is a gift that is very often misunderstood."

With more than two hundred members, COSBE anticipates a bright future for evangelism and has as a goal to double its membership, providing Southern Baptists with an army of men and women gifted in harvesting souls for the Kingdom of God.

"Evangelists are a gift to the church, placed in Scripture right beside the pastor," Fossett said. "To be effective and for SBC churches to be strong, they need to remain side by side and working together."

David Roach is pastor of Emmanuel Baptist Church in Shelbyville, Kentucky, and a PhD candidate at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky.

COSBE's Purpose Statement

- 1. Promote fellowship among its members.**
- 2. Provide inspiration and information to assist its members to more effectively fulfill the ministry to which they are called.**
- 3. Provide a means of expressing its convictions and positions to the Southern Baptist Convention, and to the world.**
- 4. Provide opportunities for the evangelists to be a source of inspiration to the pastors, ministers, and laymen of the Southern Baptist Convention.**
- 5. Act as a teaching instrument to share with, and to encourage the Convention and pastors to recognize the scriptural gift and ministry of the evangelist, according to Ephesians 4:11-12, as a partner in fulfilling the Great Commission.**

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