

A Revivalist Movement

I have long understood the Baptist Bible Fellowship to be a missionary movement. This perception came naturally; after all, I spent half of my childhood on foreign fields with my parents, BBF missionaries Arnie and Sharon Smith. More recently, though, I've become aware of another feature that defined the BBF in its early years—and, arguably, still gives it much of its shape. I'm referring to the pursuit of church growth through widespread use of revivalist techniques.

In 1950 the *Baptist Bible Tribune* stated, "Nearly every one of the preachers of the Baptist Bible Fellowship is a mass revivalist. All of our churches are the products of mass revivals."¹ By 1960, the leaders of the BBF claimed to speak for "1,100 churches composed of one million Americans."² The movement had grown phenomenally—due largely, at least from a human perspective, to its use of revival meetings.

By the late 1970s several of the BBF's key founders had passed the scene and the era of rapid expansion had subsided. It would be interesting to study whether the practice of revivalism changed during the BBF's first thirty years, and if so, how it changed. Answering those questions is a tall order—one that I am not currently prepared to undertake. But I can shed some light on the subject through an analysis of revivalism in the BBF's tenth year, 1959-60, as reported in the pages of the *Tribune*.

From its inception the *Tribune* served as connective tissue for the BBF; its themes—including revival—gave voice to the collective aspirations of pastors, missionaries, evangelists, and other leaders. The 48 issues that make up the tenth volume of the *Tribune* give account of at least 144 recent, current, or upcoming revival meetings. They also make reference to various revival meetings from previous years and provide much additional information about revival as it was understood in the early days of the BBF.

The Nature of BBF Revival Meetings

One hundred and forty of the revival meetings that the *Tribune* reported as news in 1959-60 were held on American soil—in a total of 28 states and territories. The remaining four took place in Cuba, Formosa, and the Philippines, where BBF-sponsored missionaries were stationed. Nearly two-thirds of the American revival meetings were concentrated in Texas (30), Missouri (17), Virginia (15), Ohio (11), Kansas (10), and Oklahoma (8). Meetings were reported to have taken place in 110 U.S. cities, with 20 of these being the site of two or more meetings. Not surprisingly, the site of the largest number of meetings reported (6) was Springfield, Missouri.

With one exception, all of the revival meetings reported in 1959-60 appear to have been sponsored by a single local church. This observation comes as no surprise given the movement's historic commitment to the autonomy of the local church and the authority of its pastor. While BBF churches did not experiment much in regards to sponsorship of revival meetings, they exercised more latitude in selecting a meeting emphasis. A review of the *Tribune's* 1959-60 coverage reveals three specialized emphases: missions, youth, and visitation.

Churches occasionally found it desirable to conduct revival meetings in conjunction with other multi-day events. Such events included vacation Bible schools, Bible conferences, and pastors' fellowship meetings. Such variations were likely a matter of expediency: If a capable speaker was coming from a great distance to preach a revival, it was reasonable to assemble different audiences that might benefit from diverse facets of his ministry.

Churches did not always convene their revival meetings in their own buildings. No doubt that was the most usual arrangement, but at least three alternatives were reported during the year under analysis. The tent meeting was the most common variation, being reported at least five times. Other

¹ "The First Spadeful," *Baptist Bible Tribune*, July 28, 1950, 4.

² William F. Askew, "Conference at Jacksonville Urges Inquiry," *Baptist Bible Tribune*, March 11, 1960, 5.

alternative locations included an outdoor auditorium and a brush arbor.

A final area of differentiation between revivals pertained to a planned culmination for the meetings. In cases where the revival was to serve the purpose of planting a new congregation, the series of meetings might end with the formal organization of the church. If the sponsoring church had already been organized but its pastor was inexperienced, a revival meeting might conclude with his ordination ceremony. And when a church was erecting a new building, it sometimes planned a revival meeting immediately before or shortly after dedicating the facility.

Clearly, then, organizers of BBF revivals conducted in 1959-60 exhibited the freedom to innovate within the boundaries of a consensual theological and philosophical framework. Nevertheless, all of them saw revivalism as the appropriate response to the state of their world.

The Context of BBF Revivalism

The emergence and growth of the BBF in the mid-twentieth century can only be understood in contrast to the advance of modernistic religion in America during the previous five decades. During this time many pastors, churches, and denominations had conceded elements of the historic Christian faith by accommodating evolutionary thought and higher criticism of the Scriptures. The BBF, like the Baptist Bible Union and the World Fundamental Baptist Missionary Fellowship that preceded it, responded vehemently to these compromises and stood firmly committed to the fundamental doctrines of Christianity. BBF leaders' defense of these convictions can be seen most clearly in their response to two ecclesiastical organizations: the Southern Baptist Convention and the National Council of Churches.

But liberal theology was not the only enemy that the BBF perceived. Indeed, a political (and ostensibly military) threat—communism—loomed just as large. Given the passage of the Cold War, younger readers of the *Tribune* may find it difficult to grasp why editor Noel Smith devoted front-page coverage to exposés of the communist agenda. But he and others clearly viewed communism as a vicious threat to the persistence of a free America and to the propagation of the gospel worldwide.

Opposition to communism was a cause that united both fundamentalists and Roman Catholics. But while BBF leaders may have seen Catholicism as an ally in the war against communism, they were also concerned about its rising influence in American society. John F. Kennedy's candidacy for the Presidency in 1960 projected this perception of danger into the forefront of fundamentalist consciousness.

The BBF's aversion to modernist theology, communist politics, and Roman Catholicism is understandable. However, those issues do not receive prominent coverage in the *Tribune* today. In my judgment, the BBF took a hard stand on these and other matters because of its revivalist spirit. The movement was founded for the express purpose of sending missionaries around the world, which necessitated the establishment of a strong base of American churches. Modernism, communism, and Catholicism jeopardized the missionary endeavor by undermining the authority of the Bible, threatening to abridge religious freedoms worldwide, and substituting a system of works for the gospel of salvation by grace through faith.

This, then, was the scene in 1959-60. Early constituents of the BBF viewed their denunciation of error as essential to their revivalist aspirations. Their belief in the imminent return of Christ for his church only served to intensify their fervor. Perhaps we can understand their attitudes and actions when we consider our current concern about the advancement of Islam in both its terrorist and militant religious forms.

Personalities Associated with BBF Revivalism

As I mentioned earlier, the tenth year of the *Tribune* reported at least 144 revival meetings as news. Since some of these meetings featured two or more preachers, 153 speakers were responsible for leading the 144 revivals. However, many speakers preached in several revival meetings during 1959-60,

with the result that 144 meetings engaged 78 unique preachers. Fourteen of these accounted for 81 of the aforementioned 153 speaker appointments (53%)—each taking part in at least three meetings. Eight or nine of the fourteen were full-time itinerant evangelists.

But revival preaching was not solely the province of a few especially privileged men; in fact, 56 of the 78 speakers (72%) were only reported to have preached one revival meeting during the year in question. Of the 87 speaker appointments not known to have been filled by evangelists, 45 (29%) were discharged by pastors; 11 (7%) by missionaries; 3 (2%) each by college administrators and Bible college students; 1 (1%) each by college professors and youth ministers; and 23 (15%) by speakers whose vocational role was not easily identifiable.

Music played an important role in BBF revivals. Accordingly, at least eleven of the 144 reported revivals named one or more musicians or musical groups that participated in the meeting. The sponsoring church's own music director was perhaps most often tasked with coordinating the musical elements of the revival meeting. This sort of arrangement may have been seen as less than newsworthy and was probably underreported. Nevertheless, there is some evidence that this approach was taken in several successful meetings.

Sometimes a guest music director was sought out for the meeting. For example, Earl Smith traveled from Springfield, Missouri, to Arlington, Texas, to lead the singing in a summer 1959 revival meeting. And Raymond Miller, a resident of Oakland, California, aided evangelist Don Brown in a campaign held in Salina, Kansas, in the spring of 1960. Given the distance from which these men were summoned, one can only speculate that their contribution to the quality of the meeting was expected to be significant. In addition to making provisions for direction of congregational music, some churches arranged for special performances by gifted soloists, groups, and choirs.

Revival preachers and musicians were key players in the drama of BBF revivalism. There were other agents as well—most notably, the pastors and congregations that sponsored the revival meetings. Their role will become clearer in the following section. And women, though certainly not as prominent as men, were certainly active in BBF revivals. Women provided music, children's programming, and other services.

One person whose contribution to BBF revivalism should not be overlooked was Noel Smith. In a critique of Billy Graham's ministry, he attested, "I believe in mass revivals. I ought to; I was converted in one."³ Furthermore, Smith had done "some evangelistic work before taking on the editorship of *The Fundamentalist* for [J. Frank] Norris . . ."⁴ His commitment to the revivalist cause is the reason why so much documentation of BBF revivalism appeared in the pages of the *Tribune*. He certainly had the ability and interest to write on other topics, but the subject of revival was important enough to constitute a recurring theme in his newspaper. In fact, all but three of the 48 issues published in the *Tribune's* tenth volume contained at least some reference to a revival.

Methods Used in BBF Revivalism

Sponsoring periodic revival meetings was clearly considered the norm for BBF churches in 1959-60. But pastors and churches who desired to plan and carry out such events needed direction, and for that they could turn to the news, views, and other material printed in the *Tribune*. The newspaper intentionally sought to facilitate connectivity between constituents of the BBF. Not only did it publish accounts of successful revival efforts around the United States; it also provided a forum for the exchange of recommendations, information, advice, and methods between readers who were interested in sponsoring successful revival meetings.

The *Tribune* featured recommendations of people and resources. Pastors who had organized

³ Noel Smith, "Billy Graham and His Flea," *Baptist Bible Tribune*, July 17, 1959, 8.

⁴ Keith Bassham, e-mail message to author, January 31, 2008.

revival meetings often wrote letters in which they recommended their guest preachers to other churches. The *Tribune* also reviewed, announced, or advertised resources—such as books, tracts, and hymnals—of interest to revival sponsors.

The *Tribune* further enhanced readers' understanding of revival by publishing informative pieces in a variety of genres—current events, personal narrative, history, and biography. For example, in 1959-60 readers were kept abreast of developments in Billy Graham's crusades, acquainted with the revival experience of the newly elected president of the BBF, educated about the Irish Revival of 1859, and briefed on the outcomes of an evangelist's first nineteen months of itinerant ministry.

The *Tribune* provided a wide range of advice for would-be revival organizers. G. B. Vick, whose Detroit, Michigan, church hosted the nationwide fellowship meeting in the fall of 1959, stated his opinion that "no pastor should arrange revival meetings at the time of our great national meetings."⁵ E. J. Rollings advised fellow pastors that evangelistic meetings required not merely naturally gifted musicians, but well-trained vocalists and instrumentalists, as many in the audience could distinguish between good and bad music. In a letter to the editor, Wes Auger admonished readers not to participate in cooperative revival services if doing so entailed any alliance with modernism, neo-orthodoxy, or new evangelicalism. And John A. Ross submitted a sermon that called for "a different type of revivals than we are seeing . . . in these days."⁶

Readers also reflected on theological matters pertaining to revival—most notably, in regards to the tension between divine sovereignty and human responsibility in evangelism and conversion. Most BBF pastors in 1959-60 probably would have shied away from identifying themselves as Calvinists, but there were some exceptions—among them Texas pastor L. T. Grantham. In December 1959 he wrote to the *Tribune*, "I am a strict Calvinist, but I am also a Missionary, to every lost man, also an evangelist and a revivalist. To me Hyper-Calvinism is the notion that we cannot have another great world-wide revival."⁷

Shortly after preaching a revival meeting in the spring of 1960, Grantham wrote a letter to the editor in which he attributed revival to two coordinated causes: the work of the Holy Spirit and the proclamation of God's Word. He concluded by stating that "Sovereign Grace [was] not effective until the Gospel had been preached."⁸ One might conclude that most BBF pastors were not concerned about someone labeling himself a Calvinist as long as he affirmed the imperative of revivalist preaching.

The *Tribune* also contributed to the spread of revivalism by supplying a vital forum for the exchange of methods—practical ideas about how to plan and execute a revival meeting. The records of two particular meetings held in 1959-60 go a long way towards explaining just how the agents involved performed their part in the drama of revival. A meeting held by Canton Baptist Temple lasted eight days and led to 115 conversions. It featured the preaching of Dallas Billington, pastor of Akron Baptist Temple. The host pastor, Harold Henniger, explained the church's strategy:

The church had made great preparation for this revival by placing ads daily in the newspaper, distributing 12,000 pieces of literature, 75 spot announcements on the radio—which gave us a good saturation—eight a day. We utilized 17 small billboards on the main highways of the city, also, we had a daily visitation group with as many as 25

⁵ G. B. Vick, "A Personal Invitation from Dr. Vick," *Baptist Bible Tribune*, August 21, 1959, 1. The priorities of conducting revivals and seeking out fellowship with likeminded Christian leaders were not to be pitted against each other, as each was essential.

⁶ John A. Ross, "Sermon Outline: Ye Have Robbed Me (Malachi 3:8)," *Baptist Bible Tribune*, October 2, 1959, 7. Ross's criticism of current patterns of revival grew out of his observation that many "professing Christians . . . never once open their mouths to witness to Christ's saving and keeping power."

⁷ Letters to the Tribune, *Baptist Bible Tribune*, December 11, 1959, 7.

⁸ Letters to the Tribune, *Baptist Bible Tribune*, April 22, 1960, 7.

each morning coming out and calling on prospects for the meeting. Prayer groups met nightly before the services . . .

I believe these preparations, plus one of the greatest soul winners in America, and God's blessings resulted in one of the greatest revivals we have ever had. . . . I believe any church can have an outstanding meeting with the right evangelist anointed of God, if the church will really put themselves into the meeting.⁹

The *Tribune* also described in detail a two-week meeting that evangelist Harvey Springer preached at Twin City Baptist Temple in Mishawaka, Indiana. The sponsoring pastor, Victor Sears, described the preparations as follows:

Elaborate organizational plans and advertising have been arranged. There are thousands of door-knob advertisements, and hundreds of dollars are being spent for newspaper ads, television spot announcements, automobile signs, and a daily broadcast over radio station WJVA, 1580 kc. at 12:05 noon.

The music will be in charge of Herbert Robinson, director of the church's music, and the church's 50-voice choir. Choirs from fundamental churches in the area will also be heard.¹⁰

Sears went on to explain that the series would include several special services likely to attract crowds, and that ladies would provide special programming for children each night. He concluded by inviting church leaders in the region to attend—presumably for the purpose of encouraging similar revival efforts elsewhere.

These BBF pioneers believed that conducting a successful revival meeting entailed selecting an anointed speaker, arranging for high-quality music, planning and executing an advertising campaign, seeking out specific prospects, and praying for God's blessings. The duration of the two meetings—eight and fourteen days, respectively—was fairly typical. The *Tribune's* tenth volume listed the duration of fifty-nine revival meetings held in 1959-60. The average was 9.2 days, while the median was 7.0 days.

In summary, the 1959-60 *Tribune* served its original readers by providing a steady diet of practical guidance for those who wished to organize and conduct a revival meeting. Inasmuch as it did so, the newspaper provides a fairly useful historical record of the methods that pastors and churches employed in the quest for a successful revival. Of course, success in revivalism might be defined in various ways, a matter to be addressed in the following section.

The Aims of BBF Revivalism

Many of the revival meeting reports that appeared in the *Tribune* during the year under consideration contain a statement like this: "W. E. Dowell, pastor of the High Street Baptist church, Springfield, Mo., and chairman of the faculty of Baptist Bible College, was the evangelist in *the greatest revival meeting that Bible Baptist church ever had*, according to the pastor of the church, Gene A. Lowry."¹¹ The labeling of a meeting as "successful" suggests that there were certain criteria for determining that a congregation's effort, joined with that of the revival preacher, had met with God's blessings.

Measures of success included, but certainly exceeded, professions of faith in Christ and additions to the church membership. Pastors joyfully shared a broad range of revival meeting outcomes with their peers across the country and around the world. A couple of notices published in the July 3, 1959, issue convey some of the diverse indicators that a revival meeting had been successful:

Bob Stockton, Indianapolis, Ind. Seven days with Bible Baptist church, Knox, Ind.,

⁹ In the News of the Week, *Baptist Bible Tribune*, December 11, 1959, 2-3.

¹⁰ Victor E. Sears, "Harvey Springer," *Baptist Bible Tribune*, March 18, 1960, 3.

¹¹ "60 Conversions at Richmond," *Baptist Bible Tribune*, November 13, 1959, 8; emphasis added.

Leonard Jackson, pastor. There were seven professions of faith in Christ, 22 families promising to establish a family altar, four persons making a pledge to tithe, and three additions to the church. . . .

Raymon Tracy: Two weeks with Dale Street Baptist Church, Springfield, Mo., Earl Scriviner, pastor. Two professions of faith in Christ, two baptisms, four additions to the church, and a young man surrendering for the ministry.¹²

These notices address both numerical growth (comprising conversions to Christ, baptisms, and membership additions) and spiritual growth (including commitments to disciplines such as tithing or family devotions, or acknowledgment of a call to ministry). A November 13, 1959, report follows the same general pattern: “In addition to the conversions and additions to the church, there was much confession of sin among the church membership.”¹³

But there were other dimensions, one of which is reflected in a July 3, 1959, notice:

Bruce D. Cummons, pastor Massillon Baptist Temple, Massillon, Ohio, was the evangelist in a meeting in Calvary Baptist church, Baltimore, Md., A. E. Bollman, pastor. . . .

*Calvary church, organized by Bollman four years ago, has an average Sunday school attendance above 90 . . . and is contributing to the support of four missionary families of the Baptist Bible Fellowship.*¹⁴

In this case, the mention of missionary support in proximity to a revival report suggests some connection between the two, and hints at the purpose underlying BBF revivalism.

Furthermore, an article about a Stockton, California, meeting concludes with this statement: “During the meetings Mr. Lambert got 25 subscriptions to *The Tribune*.”¹⁵ At first glance this may seem surprising, but given the networking function that the newspaper fulfilled vis-à-vis revivalism, the evangelist was quite astute. Each person who became a regular *Tribune* reader might imbibe the BBF’s grand vision of building a fellowship of churches capable of sustaining a worldwide evangelistic effort. Accomplishing this vision required more than leading unbelievers to faith in Christ and organizing them into local churches: Believers needed to grow in their capacity for service, take steps to support the BBF’s global missionary enterprise, and perhaps even surrender their lives to full-time ministry. In short, BBF revivalists were seeking to propagate the movement by creating the conditions under which the domestic and foreign ministry forces might be expanded.

Assessing BBF Revivalism

The discussion above has demonstrated the centrality of revivalism to the life of the BBF in 1959-60. Members of the BBF’s first generation viewed revival meetings as (one of) the foremost means of building a movement of local Baptist churches. Missionary candidate testimonies published in the *Tribune* imply that revivals accounted for a significant percentage of overall conversions in BBF churches, and also that revivals played a role in mobilizing disciples to deeper levels of Christian service. But they also attest to a negative aspect of revivalism—namely, that some who made professions of faith during revivals were not genuinely converted.

Taken as a whole, the evidence presented so far in this essay validates the statement from 1950 quoted in the introduction to this essay: “Nearly every one of the preachers of the Baptist Bible Fellowship is a mass revivalist. All of our churches are the products of mass revivals.” The evidence also helps to articulate the BBF’s concept of revival. The *Tribune*’s tenth volume used the word *revival* almost

¹² Evangelistic Meetings, *Baptist Bible Tribune*, July 3, 1959, 3.

¹³ “J. Townley Davis at Bassett, Va.,” *Baptist Bible Tribune*, November 13, 1959, 8.

¹⁴ Evangelistic Meetings, *Baptist Bible Tribune*, July 3, 1959, 3; emphasis added.

¹⁵ “Paul Lambert Has 55 Conversions at Stockton, Calif.,” *Baptist Bible Tribune*, December 25, 1959, 2.

exclusively in reference to a planned series of meetings—the kind of event described in the *Act* section. From the earliest times until the present, constituents of the BBF seem to have believed that God is most apt to do a miraculous work in their midst when they take seriously their responsibility to prepare for that work. Some might go so far as to conclude that God can, or at least will, *only* work through the diligence of his earthly servants.

Most BBF pastors and evangelists would probably agree with William B. Sprague, an American Presbyterian minister who in 1832 defended the stimulation of revival through means consistent with biblical teaching: “This is a matter in relation to which God is pleased to leave much to human instrumentality. It is possible that his people may co-operate with him in carrying forward a revival by such means that there may be many sound and scriptural conversions, and that his cause may thereby be greatly advanced.”¹⁶ In BBF practice, then, a revival meeting is a means of creating the conditions under which God typically carries out his purposes.

BBF revivalism, as practiced in 1959-60, was inextricably tied to the planned expansion of the independent Baptist church movement. For this reason some would call into question its legitimacy as a revival. Sprague, for example, noted: “A revival may furnish an opportunity, and suggest an inducement, to different religious sects to bring as many into their particular communion as they can; and they may sometimes do this in the exercise of an unhallowed party spirit The revival is from above, the proselyting spirit is from beneath.”¹⁷ In view of these statements, the fact that the BBF practiced revivalism as a means of building a sectarian movement is somewhat anomalous.

Finally, this essay has shown that the *Tribune* played a crucial role in facilitating BBF revivalism—something that is anything but anomalous. In fact, the media have played a prominent role in spreading revival impulses since at least the 1740s. Noel Smith astutely put the power of the press behind the vision of building a fellowship of churches that would minister on a global stage. His efforts were fruitful, effectively furthering the cause of revivalism among fundamental Baptists for a whole generation. And nearly fifty years later, the *Tribune’s* coverage can enlighten and inspire those of us who were not present to witness the revivals of 1959-60.

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¹⁶ William B. Sprague, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, reset ed. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2007), 3-4.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 43.