

# Associated Baptist Press

Editor: Greg Warner  
Associate Editor: Bob Allen  
Phone: (904) 262-6626  
Fax: (904) 262-7745

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## In this issue:

- Criswell marks 50th anniversary at First Dallas -- still preaching
- Conservative strategists meet following Executive Committee
- Pastor protests rejection of item about CBF speaker by state paper
- Southern Baptist among crowd as Clinton signs cities bill
- Pastor offers 'new haven' to special needs children

## **Criswell marks 50th anniversary at First Dallas -- still preaching**

By Toby Druin

DALLAS (ABP) — At 85, most Southern Baptist pastors have folded their tents and called it a career. W. A. Criswell will be 85 on Dec. 19, and chances are if someone put up a tent in his vicinity, he would show up to preach in it.

That is to say the venerable senior pastor of the First Baptist Church of Dallas is still doing what he loves best -- preaching.

"I thought that when we got another pastor to help me here at the church that I would be at such leisure," he said recently in an interview at his 32nd-floor office in the Lincoln Plaza across the street from the church, "but I am doing more now than I have ever done in my life."

Lately, Criswell has filled pulpits mainly as an itinerant, preaching across the country, usually on behalf of Criswell College, the ministerial training school bearing his name.

"I used to rarely accept any invitations outside the church," said Criswell. "Now I am going all over creation."

"This is what I call retirement," he said with a laugh. "I never dreamed it would be like this."

One recent engagement was the evening message at First Baptist Church on Oct. 2, climaxing a week-long series of events celebrating Criswell's 50th anniversary as pastor of the 28,000-member congregation.

The celebration began with a parade featuring '40s vintage cars and proceeded with a series of banquets and worship services with guests including SBC President Jim Henry, Sen. Phil Gramm and popular preacher Charles Swindoll.

Criswell's anniversary coincides with the release of a book written by Joel Gregory, the former pastor of First Baptist, who blames his demise as Criswell's successor on the elder pastor's reluctance to relinquish leadership when Gregory came on board.

Leaders at First Baptist, however, have little to say publicly about Gregory's charges, saying they would prefer

to accentuate the positive aspects of Criswell's ministry during the festive celebration period.

Criswell was 34 and the pastor of First Baptist Church in Muskogee, Okla., when he was called to succeed the legendary George W. Truett, who had been pastor at Dallas First for 47 years. Criswell still regards it the highlight of his ministerial career.

"Hardly anything could ever happen in the life of a preacher like their choice of me to follow Dr. Truett," he said. "Can you imagine a boy in Muskogee, Okla., being called to follow that great man?"

Born in Eldorado, Okla., the son of a cowboy-turned-barber, Criswell spent most of his childhood in Texline in the northeast tip of the Texas Panhandle. He felt called to preach at age 6, four years before his public profession of faith, and began to preach when he was 17. He attended Baylor University and then Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, where he earned a doctor of philosophy degree in 1937.

While at seminary, he was pastor of rural churches. At one of them he met and married a young church pianist and school teacher, Betty Marie Harris. The Criswells have a daughter, Mabel Anne.

Among innumerable honors, Criswell has been president of the Southern Baptist Convention (1969-70), has written 54 books, has spoken in Baptist meetings all over the world and counted several presidents of the United States in his Sunday morning audiences.

But ask him what will be his most enduring legacy and he unhesitatingly says the college which bears his name.

Criswell began the school as a Bible institute, not a college, at one time enrolling more than 1,200 for weekday classes. Leo Eddleman came in to lead the school and sought accreditation. The accrediting agency demanded it be designated a college and the men who had backed it demanded it bear the Criswell name, he said.

"They said if we called it 'Criswell' no one would doubt what it stands for," he said. Once housed at the church, the college is now in the former facilities of Gaston Avenue Baptist Church and has an enrollment of more than 300 aspiring young ministers.

Criswell said study has made it possible for him to survive in the pulpit and that he has never run out of material to preach.

"Sometimes I use the illustration of the preacher who will march up and down in his study, asking, 'Oh, Lord, Oh, Lord, what will I preach about this Sunday?'"

"I say I do the same thing, marching up and down, but I say, 'I am going to die before I get through the beginning of what I read about in this Book.'"

Throughout his career Criswell has kept his mornings free of appointments so he could devote the time to study and sermon preparation, and he advises young preachers to do the same.

When a young preacher goes to a new church, Criswell said, he should tell the congregation he will do anything in the afternoon to further the church or attend any kind of meeting or conversation in the evening, but that he will spend the mornings alone with God.

"If you will do that, I say, the following Sunday when you stand up there at the pulpit the people will know where you have been and honor it," he said.

"Prepare that message, study, pray, pore over it and then pour your whole life into it. Love the people; be good to them," Criswell advised.

In his early days, he said, his priority list was God first, then the church and family.

"If I had it to do over again I would change it to God, then family and then the church," he said.

He has gained the most pleasure over the years from being able to preach, he said. "Preparing the sermon and delivering it has been the number one happiness of my heart and life. I love trying to bless the people."

He has seen many changes over his career and observed that today's church is "increasingly impotent in secular society."

The decline, he said, is "because the preachers have turned aside from preaching the gospel. Instead of preaching the gospel and calling men to repentance and teaching the infallible, inerrant, inspired word of God, they are talking about social issues, economic confrontations, political issues, headlines, travelogues, book reviews, God

only knows what all.

"They have dismissed their prayer meetings on Wednesday nights and some have dismissed their Sunday night services.

"I think the preacher has just fallen away from the truth of God and has become a pawn in whatever social interest might invest his attention for the day."

Nevertheless, he has great hope for the future of his church under the leadership of his successor, O.S. Hawkins, and for the Southern Baptist Convention, now controlled by the so-called "conservative resurgence" he is said to have inspired.

Criswell said he is proud of his Southern Baptist ties, denying the oft-repeated rumor that had he to do it over again he would be an Independent Baptist. He might have said that "just trying to be sarcastic," he said, "but if you mean by independent that I would not be in the Southern Baptist Convention, that is not true."

-30-

### **Conservative strategists meet following Executive Committee**

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- Strategists for the conservative movement met behind closed doors Sept. 21 in Nashville, Tenn., to hear of plans and progress of their movement within state conventions.

The group, organized by T. C. Pinckney of Alexandria, Va., met on the heels of the fall meeting of the Southern Baptist Executive Committee, of which Pinckney serves as secretary. Other members of the Executive Committee also participated.

In recent years, the group has met periodically, most often following the Executive Committee, to help extend the influence of conservatives in state conventions.

Pinckney, a retired Air Force general, said no head count was taken, but by "a good estimate," 25-30 people attended the meeting from several states. Most were not Executive Committee members, he added. He declined to say where the meeting was held.

Conservatives have targeted the state convention presidencies, hoping to repeat the success they had in using the Southern Baptist Convention presidency to steer the national SBC onto a more conservative course. Most state presidencies carry power to appoint important committees that choose state leaders.

But the effort was less than successful last fall. Presidential candidates backed by conservative forces lost in at least seven large Baptist conventions -- in Florida, Kentucky, Louisiana, Missouri, North Carolina, Texas and Virginia. However, conservative-backed candidates won in several other states, including South Carolina and Arkansas.

Asked if the group expects to make any gains in state convention meetings this fall, Pinckney said: "We really didn't talk in those kinds of terms. We didn't try to make any assessment state by state or even a representative sampling."

Pinckney said the loosely structured state-level group, which has met at least five times in the last two years, does not have a national strategy for gaining control of the state conventions but meets merely to exchange experiences from their states.

Pinckney described the meeting as a "sort of general sharing session" with no set agenda. "In very general terms, we talked about a variety of subjects really across a very wide spectrum," he said.

-- By Greg Warner and Bob Allen

### **Pastor protests rejection of item about CBF speaker by state paper**

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. (ABP) -- An Albuquerque, N.M., pastor says his church's rights were violated when their Baptist state paper refused to print an item announcing a speech by Keith Parks.

Parks, former president of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board, now runs the missions program for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, a moderate organization which promotes alternatives to programs of the conservative-dominated Southern Baptist Convention.

Michael Champouillon, pastor of Heights Baptist Church in Albuquerque, said the Baptist New Mexican treated Parks as "an enemy of the gospel" by refusing to announce that he would be a guest speaker at the church Oct. 1.

"At the very least, having this long-honored missionary leader in our church should be considered newsworthy," Champouillon wrote in an open letter addressed to Baptists "still concerned about freedom and the autonomy of the local church."

Claude Cone, executive director of the Baptist Convention of New Mexico, which publishes the Baptist New Mexican, said the paper does not promote meetings of the Fellowship because its programs compete with the SBC and stir controversy.

"We're not going to promote any meeting that competes with the mission program that we are trying to promote," said Cone.

John Loudat, the Baptist New Mexican's editor, said this is the first time the issue has arisen since his election as editor last November but agreed with Cone there is a "perception" the Fellowship is in competition with the SBC.

Champouillon said he asked if the paper would print a similar article announcing a speaker from the Prison Fellowship or a similar non-SBC ministry and the answer was affirmative.

"Keith Parks has deserved the respect of Baptists for a long time and should not be treated with this kind of disrespect and lack of Christian grace," Champouillon said.

Also, he added, "Heights Baptist Church has continued to support the Cooperative Program and deserves the same rights as any other Southern Baptist church to announce its meetings in the Baptist New Mexican."

-- By Bob Allen and Greg Warner

### **Southern Baptist among crowd as Clinton signs cities bill**

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- President Clinton has signed into law a bill encouraging America's private sector to fight poverty by investing in businesses and other ventures in areas affected by economic blight.

The Community Development Financial Institutions Act, signed by Clinton Sept. 23, creates a new

independent agency to support institutions which provide loans in inner cities and other communities which conventional financial markets will not serve.

Among the 200 guests on hand for the bill's signing was Southern Baptist pastor Don Sharp. A corporation formed by Sharp's church, Faith Tabernacle Baptist Church in Chicago, recently borrowed \$78,000 from the Chicago Community Loan Fund for bridge money to rehabilitate a 24-unit vacant apartment building.

The Chicago Community Loan Fund is one of a number of community development financial institutions nationwide promoting businesses and other projects to rebuild inner cities and other areas affected by economic blight.

"Nobody seriously believes that government can be society's savior anymore," Clinton said in a ceremony at the U.S. Department of Agriculture in Washington, "but very few people seriously believe that government can sit on the sideline anymore."

In the 21st century, Clinton said, government must find ways to "be a more effective partner and to find ways to clear away barriers so that people can be empowered to live up to the fullest of their own capacities."

The new law, which Clinton said fulfills a promise he made during his campaign, is "not about distributing handouts" but "about new opportunity for people to assume responsibility to make good lives for themselves by making the private sector work in places where it had not gone before."

The Faith Tabernacle project will not only provide low-rent housing, Sharp said, but the church will set up self-help programs such as tutoring and GED classes, staffed by volunteers, in the community established when the new residents move in.

"We're not just doing affordable housing, but what we call empowerment," Sharp said, adding he was encouraged by the president's affirmation of such initiatives.

"It's a sense of hope that we've got a friend in the White House, that we've got a president who understands the needs of those of us out there in the trenches," Sharp said.

"Really listening" to Clinton's speech at the bill signing, "you got the impression that here was a man who had a desire to make the quality of life better for people who would not otherwise have an opportunity to have a sense of hope or a sense of making it or survival," Sharp said.

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-- By Bob Allen

## **Pastor offers 'new haven' to special needs children**

By Ken Camp

MINERAL WELLS, Texas (ABP) -- More than 10 years ago, Jim Rhodes cared for his first child with special needs. Since then, Rhodes and his wife, Melinda, have opened their home in Mineral Wells, Texas, to about 300 children with physical, emotional and psychological disabilities.

"Some of the children need help for just a short time. Others are our forever children," said Rhodes, pastor of First Baptist Church of Whitt, Texas.

Eight of those "forever children" have been legally adopted by the Rhodeses. The oldest, Tammy, is now 22 and has a 1-year-old child of her own. The youngest, Sammy, is a month old.

At one point, Rhodes trained a year to qualify as a foster care provider. But then he learned that by law he would be allowed to care only for foster children referred from Child Protective Services, not other special needs children brought to him directly by their parents. Rhodes rejected the foster care designation and the state funding

that went with it.

"I told the Lord I'd turn down only the ones he would turn down," he said.

Rhodes and his wife formed New Haven Home, a non-profit, charitable organization, "depending on the Lord for the children and the funding."

The Rhodeses operate New Haven without any paid staff. At any given time, they are equipped to care for up to 14 children in their home -- a one-time boarding house that was slated to be condemned before they renovated it. Over the span of one year, 1993, they cared for 42 children.

Next to the house, Rhodes built one of what is believed to be one of only three playgrounds in Texas designed entirely for handicapped children. He spent five years building the playground, which is open not only to children from New Haven, but also serves children with physical disabilities from as far away as Fort Worth, an hour's drive.

"Going to the playground can be a traumatic experience for children with disabilities," he said. "This playground enables those kids to have a place to play where nobody laughs, nobody makes fun of them, and parents can feel at ease."

Some of the children who live in the Rhodes house are confined to wheelchairs. One 17-year-old quadriplegic -- the victim of a drive-by shooting -- is on a ventilator and requires 24-hour care. Many of the children have been abused or neglected. Nearly all require special medical care.

Before he became a Christian at age 33 and felt called into the ministry two years later, Rhodes worked 18 years as a medical technician, gaining experience in laboratory, X-ray and surgical procedures.

"The Lord put me in the medical field to give me training. He put me in the ministry to give me a heart. Then he put the two together here," Rhodes said.

New Haven has expanded to include housing for unwed mothers and homeless families. Already this year, three children have been born to women at New Haven, and two more women have called the toll-free New Haven hotline at 800-547-0558 asking for a place to stay until their babies arrive.

New Haven has purchased four single family dwellings, one duplex and one four-unit apartment off of the local tax rolls "for next to nothing," Rhodes said.

Last year, the Rhodeses provided about 3,600 shelter nights and more than 9,100 meals. Overnight shelter is provided at no cost. Low-cost secondary housing is provided for a limited time to families in an effort to help them to become self-sufficient.

Recently, two additional facilities at the old Fort Wolters military base were donated to New Haven, greatly increasing the ministry's potential capabilities. The Department of Health and Human Services provided a 6,000-square-foot building as a shelter for homeless families. And the American Legion gave a building that Rhodes hopes to transform into a job training center for homeless people.

The new space makes it possible for New Haven to provide as many as 30,000 shelter nights next year, a proposition Rhodes finds "overwhelming."

Currently, he is exploring possibilities with Bob Tremaine, director of missions for Parker-Palo Pinto Baptist Area, and Lester Mcriwether, consultant in the Church Ministries Department of the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

Tremaine hopes to involve area churches in various volunteer roles with New Haven. Securing Mission Service Corps volunteers, summer missionaries or US-2 missionaries through the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board also is being discussed.

Although the future direction of New Haven is not certain, Rhodes is sure of one thing: God is using the ministry to touch the lives of "throw-away" children and families.

One troubled teen-ager arrived at New Haven as a high school drop-out, probably headed for the penitentiary, Rhodes said. After one year of love and support, however, she completed high school, earned a full scholarship to a college in Louisiana and is completing her training to become an elementary school teacher.

Rhodes points to other success stories such as one child labeled "vegetative," who eventually developed into

a computer whiz.

"These kids are miracle kids," he said. "They do things it was said they could never do. But the Lord does it through love and prayer."

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