

Of Grinches, Goblins, Gremlins and Ghosts

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There are a good many things about which most of us maintain a healthy skepticism. Some of those are listed in the title of this essay. However skeptical you may be, there are two categories of humans for whom at least one of the above is very real—the terrified and those who love to tell ghost stories to keep the fearful tied in a knot. While statistics and their interpretation are not unimportant (3,000 saved on the Day of Pentecost), they often function in Southern Baptist life to remind me of a search for goblins that have no reality. LifeWay recently released statistics gathered from reports of the churches. Doomsayers and analysts immediately began to explain to readers what the numbers “meant” and why such catastrophic shrinkage had occurred in Southern Baptist churches. So, to paraphrase Luke, “since many have taken in hand” this assessment, maybe one more will do no harm. In fact, another perspective might even be helpful.

At the outset one can only say that the picture does not look the way those of us who played a role in the Conservative Renaissance had imagined and hoped. We did not embark upon that massive effort merely for the sake of truth, even though such would surely have been noble. Neither were we convinced that full confidence in the truth of Scripture would result in more evangelism and missions because we knew of historical cases of orthodoxy that apparently produced spiritual pride, atrophy, and sometimes detestable legalism. But we could discover no place in history where any movement based on questioning the authority and accuracy of God’s Word ever produced evangelistic fervor, missionary zeal, or healthy churches. This latter truth, which vitally affected the eternal destiny of millions, drove us to risk the movement thus spawned. We prayed and hoped that revival would follow, and we have not yet abandoned that hope. So while I am mortified by the picture of dropping baptisms, I fear that some proposed interpretations and solutions have little more to commend them than do the “gremlins.” Consider these observations:

1. Thumbing through the recently arrived 2007 Annual of the Southern Baptists of Texas Convention, I counted about 500 churches (or 25%) that did not respond with an annual report. The national average may be lower, but I know that fewer churches are responding. I also suspect that a major reason for no response is embarrassment about those statistics. Nevertheless, if 98% had responded, how would baptisms look? No one knows.
2. The small membership loss is actually not such a tragedy. I want to grow, but I want to do so legitimately. There is a need to purge our rolls of two to four million more who never attend and are not involved in any way. Let’s be honest: We lie to ourselves and to the world to count people as “members” who no longer have anything to do with our churches. If we cleansed our rolls, we would take a giant step toward integrity and the blessings of God—and our

ratio for baptisms in relation to membership would fall considerably. It would not be “good” until it is at least one to one, but it would be much improved.

3. Thrashing the Conservative Renaissance as though it were somehow responsible for this decline is irresponsible. One need only ask for the evangelistic and missionary statistics for the moderate churches whose leaders provided the opposition to conservatives in order to debunk this allegation. The present state cannot please our Lord, but it is a safe bet that He is more pleased about what we are attempting globally than about the social and environmentally based programs of moderate and liberal churches. If the Conservative Renaissance had not happened, our evangelism would look exactly like moderate churches, which are in decline.
4. “Mean spiritedness” is certainly never pleasing to God. But I am less than certain which Baptists are guilty of the charge of “mean spiritedness” and, therefore, share in the cause of the decline. Without doubt an abuse of congregationalism has occurred in Southern Baptist life. The turning of opportunities to seek the leadership of the Holy Spirit and determine strategies to get the gospel to all into monthly town meeting debates and expressions of personal opinion has driven many from the churches and still more from congregationalism. This is tragic.

But I cannot help but suspect that an incipient post-modern influence is the womb from which part of this criticism arises. The world and much of “Christianity” is irritated that Southern Baptists on one hand continue to oppose abortion, the practicing of homosexuality, gender confusion, the alcoholic beverage industry that annually kills, harms, and creates so much sorrow in the social order, and on the other hand support biblical role assignments in the home and church. We can always improve the graciousness with which we articulate our positions, but we have no choice about what we endorse and what we reject if we follow Christ and the Bible. Jesus Himself warned, “If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you” (John 15:19).

The same is true for doctrine. To be unapologetically Baptist, embracing the exclusivism of Christ in salvation, the inerrancy of God’s Word, and the concept of a regenerate church witnessed by baptism and disciplined to live for Christ is to the minds of some, “mean-spirited.” Again, sensitivity of expression will help, but doctrinal clarity is not popular nor has it ever been.

Who are these “mean-spirited” among us? Is it also “mean-spirited” to make broad imprecise allegations of “mean-spiritedness”? Are some who make these charges guilty themselves?

5. The allegation that the “young leaders” are leaving Southern Baptists, and we will never reach our world if we do not change and adopt methods that appeal to the culture is to me the strangest of all. Who are these young leaders? How many left? How are they doing now? Did they leave “because they were never

really a part of us” (1 John 2:19)? I have spent the last 33 years of my life working with young people destined to become leaders. People in Florida like Anthony George; in North Carolina like J. D. Greear; in Texas like Nathan Lino, Byron McWilliams, Brad Jurkovich, Michael Lewis, and Mark Howell to name just the first ones that come to my mind today. They would never refer to themselves as “young leaders.” They know too well that they were called to be servants and pastors and that “leadership” is something arising out of what my father liked to call “moral ascendancy.”

In the church, genuine leaders are not simply proclaimed to be leaders. In Baptist life, both young and old leaders have been recognized as such either because they were great preachers/teachers of biblical revelation or because they were wonderful, consistent soul-winners or because they built great churches or because their spirits and attitudes were the sources of great encouragement to others. They did not yield to those who were “despising their youth” but were “examples to the flock” (1 Tim 4:12). This is precisely what most, like the ones mentioned above, have done. But some self-proclaimed “young leaders” appear to be more concerned about embracing the culture, rejecting the past, and demanding personal liberty rather than following the biblical road to leadership.

6. The suggestion that sensitivity to the culture and the incorporation of that culture into the church and its worship is the change, which if implemented, would start us on the road to evangelistic effectiveness is misguided. I am the first to admit that dullness and “Baptist tradition” were too often the rule in our churches. There is no excuse for being boring or settling into numbing sameness. For years I inveighed against high church music, not because I did not like it but because it communicated with less than 10% of the people. But has somebody missed the obvious here? The more attune to culture Southern Baptists have become and the more we have incorporated the world into our worship, the more our baptisms have dropped! Although I am not certain that there is a connection, as will become evident in what follows, but I admit that I am suspicious.

Well, the time has come to identify the real problems—not ghosts and goblins. The first failure is the busyness of the age, which has robbed churches of serious prayer. Once Southern Baptist people were almost entirely from the working class and not highly valued in the social order. When we were not respectable, we sought the intervention of God. And He responded powerfully. We will continue to have downward trends until we recognize that it is “not by might nor by power but by my Spirit says the Lord Almighty” (Zech. 4:6). Prayerlessness is foe number one.

The second culprit is our failure to witness. We are so adept at “marketing” and “programming” that we have failed to share Christ individually on a consistent basis. In fact, because meaningful church membership has been traded for numerical addition, most of our people hardly witness at all.

Third, the shallow state of preaching has exacerbated the lethargy of the church and left the lost with no real Word from God. The pastor ought to be the major source of theological

understanding and the most able teacher of the Bible. Anemic pulpits create anemic churches and denominations.

Finally, our churches, in their hot pursuit of cultural adaptability look more and more like the culture and the world. Even at its best, the church is not good at being the world. In looking like a faint imitation of the world, the holiness of God and a thirst to be like Him have apparently been lost. And with the loss of holiness has come the corresponding loss of power and appeal!

Well do I recognize that these four culprits offer nothing new, nothing glitzy, nothing mysterious, nothing cool. But for all their antiquity, their simplicity, their lack of creativity, they are just as true today as ever. Style, culture, dress, drink, etc. have almost nothing to do with how churches perform. The need today is not for self-appointed analysts manipulating statistics and pontificating about their meaning, but who are usually less than stellar soul-winners, Bible teachers, or pastors. The great need is for us to sense our spiritual poverty, seek God's face, and do his bidding. Folks, it is really that simple.

Maybe we need to remember this admonition from Jeremiah. It has little to do with culture, styles, or attire but everything to do with what is really of consequence: "Thus says the Lord: 'Stand in the ways and see, and ask for the old paths, where the good way is, and walk in it; then you will find rest for your souls.'" (Jer 6:16).

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