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Churches that Ignite Revival

Elmer L. Towns
Liberty University

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What Ever Happened to the Invitation?

by Billy Walker

One Easter Sunday my 80-year-old pastor gave the sermon and an invitation to come forward and receive Christ. I came! Fifteen years later I was speaking at a great Bible conference. On the first night, I gave a salvation invitation. Several came to be saved. The next morning the Bible teacher spoke for 30 minutes, presenting the invitation as frothy and foolish. I was brokenhearted. Who was I to argue with the president of a Christian college? How could I debate a man so many years my senior? Could my simple bachelor's degree stand up against nearly an alphabet of degrees? Later that day I visited Amy Stockton, beloved missionary to the American heathen. She encouraged me to keep on giving invitations. "Why," she said, "I can remember when that man gave invitations himself. Maybe he tired of an empty altar or was embarrassed by a lack of decisions, but," she pleaded, "Billy, don't quit."

Yet across the land so many have. Churches where once many walked

the aisles to be saved now close with no such opportunity. Once upon a time our churches had prolonged evangelistic crusades . . . now our church calendars are too cluttered, our schedules too hectic, our priorities too confused for such things.

John R. Rice said in *Why Our Churches Do Not Win Souls*, "Every line should have a hook to catch a fish. Preachers should be fishers of men. Every sermon should have a definite aim and should be followed by an urgent demand for action."

Too many Christian schools are filling our pulpits with psychologists instead of preachers, with counsel instead of challenge, with introspection instead of invitation.

In his book *Evangelistic Work*, A. T. Pierson tells us, "A careful study of the preachers who have wielded most spiritual power will show they are always seeking after souls When the aim of every sermon is to glorify God in saving and sanctifying souls, and toward that end every thought and word and gesture converge, we shall see results of which even Pentecost was but a prophecy and foretaste."

Someone complained to D. L. Moody about his methods in reaching sinners for the Saviour. He admitted that they could be better and asked his critic what method he used to get people saved. When there was no answer Moody responded, "I like my method better than yours."

The invitation is certainly not new. Faris Whitesell reminds us in *65 Ways to Give an Evangelistic Invitation* that "Modern evangelistic invitations are of comparatively recent origin.

But the spirit and principle of the evangelistic invitation is as old as the Bible itself." Moses gave an invitation (Exod. 32:26), Joshua too (Josh. 24:15). King Josiah as well as Ezra and Nehemiah gave invitations. Jesus gave many invitations (Matt. 4:19, 9:9, 11:28-30; Luke 14:23; 19:5).

John R. Rice offered some direction for the invitation in *How to Have a Revival*. Be honest. Get definite results by a definite invitation. Keep control of the audience and press the invitation with holy fervor. An even more complete list of suggestions is offered by C. Sumner Wemp in his book *The Guide to Practical Pastoring*.

The excesses or failures that have come in past invitations are not sufficient reason to quit offering them. Nothing will enrich a church, enhance a service, or encourage the saints more than to see people respond to an invitation to receive Christ.

How I thank God for that faithful pastor who gave an invitation that Easter Sunday when I was saved. May God help us to take the final words of Scripture and apply them to our every sermon: "The Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely."

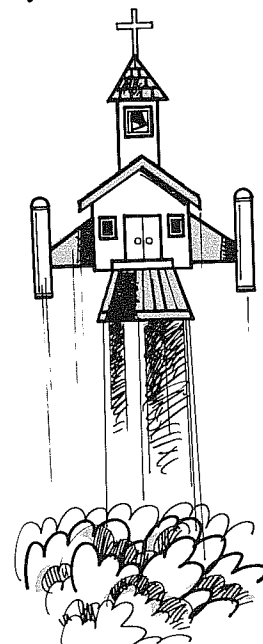
And oh the blessings that will be yours as next Sunday they come—when you give that invitation to receive Christ.

■ Billy Walker is an evangelist in Southgate, Michigan.

Churches that Ignite Revival

Having been a church watcher for more years than I care to mention, I notice that certain congregations seem to have something unusual that makes them grow in number, change lives, and capture their towns for Christ. These churches solve their problems, overcome inertia, introduce new ministries, preach refreshingly, and generally excite others about their church. They are the "hot ones." As model churches they influence many other churches.

A model church develops a new ministry, takes a fresh attitude, or gets results that no one else is getting. People begin visiting the latest "hot one." They talk to the pastor, walk through the Sunday school, sit in the services, and expose themselves to the flame of God in this church. They want to capture the



imagination and take home some of the heat and light from the latest "church aflame."

During the mid 1950s, First Baptist Church in Dallas,

Texas, was a hot one. Dr. W. A. Criswell, in his mid-forties, was reaching out to thousands of young couples pouring into the suburbs around "Big D." These couples were attracted to his method of preaching through the Bible chapter by chapter. They met Christ, joined the church, learned to serve Jesus Christ, and began their life in the big city. As they grew older and prospered financially, their church also prospered as a result of their tithe and service. Dr. Criswell is a patriarch today because he earned respect as a young preacher over 40 years ago.

In the sixties many Baptists began going to Highland Park Baptist Church, Chattanooga, Tennessee, to hear Lee Roberson. His bus ministry was outstanding and many copied his plan of evangelistic soulwinning by house-to-house visitation. He organized his Sunday school, using the administrative skills of a Southern Baptist. Yet he preached with the flaming heat of an independent Baptist. With the dual skills of Roberson, Highland Park became one of the largest Sunday schools in America.

In the 1970s Jerry Falwell coined the phrase "Saturation Evangelism," employed the electronic church, and used all techniques to reach all people at all times. His Sunday school at Thomas Road Baptist Church, Lynchburg, Virginia, doubled from 2,600 to over 5,000 in one year and eyebrows arched toward the small community of 71,000. When people wondered if anyone would ever break the 10,000 barrier, Thomas Road attendance did and today runs far beyond that.

One of the characteristics of a "hot" church is the revival flame that burns

within the congregation. Just as people come out of their homes on a cold night to watch a house burn, people come from all over America to see the flame of revival sweep through a local church. Fire warms us all.

Those who study revival speak about "carriers" of revival. For example, Falwell testifies he visited Lee Roberson at Highland Park Baptist Church and gained a vision of building a similar church in his hometown. Carriers go to observe revival, experience the warmth of God's love, and take that revival back to their home, sharing their new experience. Then revival breaks out in their home church. Hence they have carried the flame and started a new fire.

Next month we will examine how a "hot one" loses its flame.

■ Elmer Towns

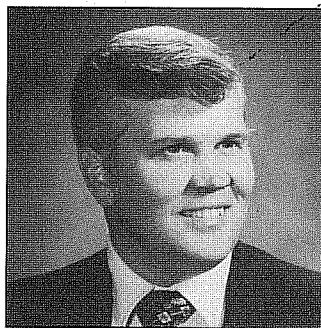
Herb Rice: Pastor of a Growing Church in a Shrinking Community

"Why do I do what I do? Because Jesus loved me enough to die for me and that's all the reason I need. I was a very real heathen, and Jesus challenges me to be a very real Christian."

That is the motivation behind Herb Rice, pastor of the Grace Bible Church in Hollidaysburg, Pennsylvania. His church of 1,250 members grew from a group of 39 people—the remainder of a church that split. The ill will between the two groups offered Rice his greatest opportunity: "We

were able to demonstrate to a very fragmented community that God's people do not have to be divided. Eight years ago there was a lot of division and dissension between churches in our town. We've shown that it's not necessary, and we can be one in Christ even though we have differences."

Rice graduated from the Institute of Biblical Studies of Liberty University in 1977. He had been the owner of a successful insurance agency in Danville, Virginia, and was saved at



age 29. Rice was reared in a non-Christian home and did not attend church. At his conversion he realized his lack of biblical knowledge and decided to attend the institute to equip himself to be a good Sunday school teacher. He decided to take every class offered, and each weekday he traveled 130 miles to attend classes. He audited a homiletics class as a favor to students who needed a certain quota to keep the class open, and God burdened his heart for a preaching ministry. The first line of the homiletics textbook was, "If all else seems ridiculous to you, you're probably called to preach." Rice realized how futile the insurance business seemed, even though it was prospering.

Fourteen days after graduation Rice was pastor of the Grace Bible Church. Today he is well on the way to his goal—to have

5,000 people in regular attendance at the church. The church's property value has increased from \$150,000 to \$2 million. Its various ministries include a bus ministry, a Liberty Godparent program, a deaf ministry, a preschool center, and specialized ministries to youth, senior citizens, ladies, college students, and prisoners.

But building a successful church has not been easy. Rice's community has shrunk from 80,000 to 50,000 people. The area has the second highest unemployment rate in the country. The economy is depressed. "Our community is literally shrinking," says Rice, "but the church persecuted is the church pure. It is historically true that when finances are hard to come by, the church is prosperous. Our church is doing marvelously."

The primary challenge of the ministry is "to make as many people as much like Christ in the shortest possible time," believes Rice. "Probably the most discouraging thing is to average between 15 and 20 hours a week in Bible study and watch a people who are not growing accordingly—an apathetic, or if you will, a gospel-hardened people."

But Rice has plenty of encouragement. The church averaged 21 souls saved per month for nearly nine years. This year the average has increased to 35 souls per month. The spirit of the church continues to be warm and giving. "Sunday night after I dismissed the service, the majority of the congregation was still in the church 45 minutes later," says Rice. "The families of our church and their unity is the greatest pleasure I have in the ministry."

■ Angela E. Hunt