

Tennessee Pastor Says More Baptists Are Wearing Charismatic Label

Ron Phillips points to a growing number of Southern Baptists who are hungering for a 'spiritual dimension' in their faith

As the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) moves toward a firmer fundamentalist stand, a sizable contingent remains committed to charismatic worship styles and beliefs.

Singing contemporary worship songs such as "Let It Rise," "Send Your Fire" and "Jump in the River," these Spirit-filled Baptists aren't afraid to jump and shout. Some break traditions against dancing.

However, this embracing of spiritual gifts comes in a more subdued flavor. At a Fresh Oil and New Wine conference held last May in Chattanooga, Tenn., no messages in tongues were given—even though Bible teacher Jack Taylor taught about their validity.

"I still don't think tongues need to be exercised unless an elder, pastor or leader gets an interpretation," said host pastor Ron Phillips. "The problem is Baptists have had structure without the Spirit, and some people have the Spirit without structure."

Clearly, more SBC members hunger for this spiritual dimension. More than 400 churches registered for the event, held at Central Baptist in Chattanooga, compared with 170 at the first conference in 1998. Phillips said the sessions focus on praise

and worship and spiritual warfare, and provide biblical guidance.

One frequently aired criticism of charismatic phenomena has been people falling during prayer, often termed "slaying in the Spirit." Yet numerous people experienced that phenomenon after Taylor's teaching.

He pointed out that God knocked Paul to the ground en route to Damascus. He also referred to such verses as Ephesians 5:17-18 and John 7:37-39 to bolster his position that the filling of the Spirit is a biblical command and a promise.

"It ought to be a constant filling," Taylor said. He asserted that if leaders worship money, attendance records or numbers of baptisms, then they can work for years in their flesh without success.

Pastor Edgar Jackson, whose Gulfport, Miss., church hosts an annual Kingdom Anointing conference, has seen visiting SBC pastors receive the baptism in the Holy Spirit and leave for home glowing. He has seen miracles too. In the last six years he has overcome colon and liver cancer and says a member of his church was cured of AIDS.

"Baptists are so hungry for anything right now that has to do with a move of God," said the pastor of Pass Road Baptist. "When revival broke out in Brownsville [Assembly of God in Pensacola, Fla.], it broke out in our church."

That doesn't mean everyone welcomes it. Evangelist Paul Vick, who conducts half of his crusades in SBC churches, sees a growing polarization. He believes those resisting the Holy

Spirit are becoming more entrenched, just as those embracing spiritual gifts are becoming more enthusiastic. The resulting clash leads to such action as the dismissal of an Atlanta-area pastor last year, whose church then shrank from 300 to 35.

"Traditionalists don't like my message," said Vick, co-host of the first Bring Back the Glory conference at suburban Dallas' Metro Church, an SBC church, next February. "I have had a lot of opposition. But I think most of the people are absolutely starving to death for a move of God."

Nor is the thirst restricted to Baptists. In Florida recently, a Lutheran pastor got knocked to the floor at a revival meeting. He later erected a sign in front of his church that read, "Call 9-1-1; this church is on fire." Many Spirit-filled Methodists have called Vick in recent months asking him to teach on renewal.

Charles Carrin believes the hard-line stance against spiritual gifts is about to change. The Florida evangelist was an independent Baptist preacher when he was baptized in the Holy Spirit in 1977.

Carrin says he senses in his spirit that some high-profile Southern Baptist pastors will soon receive this baptism. He believes they will "suddenly capitulate" and join the renewal camp.

"I don't even know that these men know it's their destiny," he said. "I didn't. I think it's an unstoppable movement. Southern Baptists aren't going to be able to ignore it. Their attempts to disenfranchise Spirit-filled pastors will fail

because their numbers are going to continue to grow.”

Still, after the convention passed a statement saying only men can be senior pastors, some wonder if charismatics will form the next target for fundamentalist leaders.

The SBC’s executive committee rejected a move last year to study the effects of charismatic worship practices. And before leaving office in June, president Paige Patterson wrote Phillips. He said if the pastor had any integrity he would leave the convention.

Should cessationists go after Spirit-filled Baptists, they may find such believers have a groundswell of support. Phillips gets calls daily from pastors nationwide who have been touched by the Spirit but are afraid to share it with their congregations.

Their wives are being filled, too. At a women’s luncheon during Fresh Oil, pastors’ spouses and Central Baptist staff members spoke of their experiences with the Holy Spirit, some going back as far as 20 years.

Longtime media director Angie McGregor was baptized in the Spirit outside a Baptist church in Knoxville, Tenn., while in college. Although she didn’t exercise the gift publicly for many years, she said the church’s spiritual outpouring has given people a heart to serve and make visitors feel at home.

“I was never taught this,” she said. “I didn’t have any Pentecostal teachers cramming this down my throat, telling me I had to do this. Out of my hunger for God, He showed me His power.”