

Thesis: **First of all, pray!**

Dateline: LOUISVILLE, Ky. Headline: *Southern Baptists face further decline without renewed evangelism emphasis.* Author: Rob Phillips

Southern Baptist membership will fall nearly 50 percent by 2050 unless the aging and predominantly white denomination reverses a 50-year trend and does more to strengthen evangelism, reach immigrants, and develop a broader ethnic base, according to data just released by [LifeWay Research](#).

[Ed Stetzer](#), director of LifeWay Research, told editors of the Association of State Baptist Papers on Monday that while [SBC](#) membership has risen most years – by as much as 4 percent in 1951 – the rate of increase has been declining by 0.06 percent per year, and the membership change trend line has now passed into negative territory.

. . . Using U.S. Census projected population figures, SBC membership could fall from a peak of 6 percent of the American population in the late 1980s to 2 percent in 2050."

Stetzer quoted Cliff Tharp, formerly with LifeWay and an SBC statistician for 35 years, who said, "We have been slowing in our growth and have now passed into decline. We are right at the top of the arc and beginning to go down. But changes we make now can change that trend significantly. These stats are not new but it has never caught anyone's attention until now."

“Heaven, we have a problem!” Certainly there are bright spots, and we thank God for them, but the truth remains that we are not winning our worlds for Christ, no matter how we attempt to package it.

USA TODAY (March 26, 2009), an article by Cathy Lynn Grossman:

The Southern Baptist Convention, which is launching a new national campaign to bring unbelievers to Jesus, is up against a major obstacle: motivating its own members to evangelize.

“Heaven, we have a problem!”

Associated Press (April 24, 2009), an article by Rose French:

NASHVILLE, Tennessee — Southern Baptist churches baptized fewer people in 2008 for the fourth year in a row to reach the lowest level since 1987, and membership in America's largest Protestant denomination fell slightly as well.

In the past 50 years, the number of annual baptisms per church member — a key indicator of church growth — has dropped sharply. Southern Baptists baptized one person for every 19 church members in 1950, a ratio that dropped to 1 baptism for every 47 church members in 2008, according to the report.

“Heaven, we have a problem!” By the way, Ridgecrest, our baptism to members ratio is about 1 baptism for every 50 church members! That is unacceptable!

I am convinced that our orders today from our Commander in Chief – King Jesus – is to raze hell! I know that includes attacking problems that are destroying lives, addressing issues of social justice, battling racism and poverty and disease, and on and on. There are many works of the devil to be destroyed, and I am praying that we can raise up strong followers of Jesus who can raze hell! But at the center of our hell-razing must be the redemption of men, women, and children who are currently without Christ and without hope in this world! For them, there is literally “hell to pay” unless God snatches them from the burning.

So, given the realities we are facing as a Church and the seemingly impossible task of reaching our worlds for Christ, what are we to do? Is it time for us (with a nod to Longfellow) to “fold our tents . . . and silently slip away?” Do we abandon the mission and hunker down until the trumpet sounds? Is the harvest hopeless? I say No! Our call is clear and our Lord is strong! We can again see a great ingathering of the harvest for Jesus’ sake.

“What’s it going to take, Pastor?” I’m glad you asked! Let’s listen to our Lord as He saw the great needs all around Him. Turn to Matthew’s gospel, and find Chapter 9. We will begin reading at verse 35:

35 Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every sickness and every disease among the people. 36 But when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd. 37 Then He said to His disciples, "The harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few. 38 Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest." (Matthew 9:35-38 NKJV)

To this text we address this question: What must we do that can give us hope for a great ingathering of the harvest? The text gives us several answers, some of which we will return to in the next few weeks. Let's look back and find them.

Notice first that Jesus was on the move! In verse 35 we read that *Jesus went about all the cities and villages*. He never appears as hurried or stressed, but He was a man with a mission and he moved! Then, in verse 38, he told His disciples to *pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest*, and it is obvious that He expected his disciples to be **on the move** also.

We will never bring the world to Jesus sitting in our pews! We have labored for too long with the notion that "if we build it, they will come." The "it" we will build may be an actual building, or it may be a ministry program, a certain style of worship, or a certain pastor or staff leader, but the hope is still that there are things we can do **here** that will win the world that is **not here!** Does that seem a little insane, especially since we have been trying it forever and it is not working? Do not hear what I am not saying: I am not saying that we settle for shoddiness and mediocrity, and I am most certainly not saying that we do not invite people to our worship services or to special events. God can and does use "invitational evangelism," and I encourage you to do that. But I still believe if we are to see a significant change in the bringing in of the harvest, it will be because we go to people **where they are** and love them **where they are**, and serve them **where they are**, and plant gospel seed into their lives **where they are**, and nurture the interest God awakens in them **where they are**, and extend to them **where they are** the offer of eternal life for those who repent and believe! If we win our worlds to Jesus, we will win them **where they are!** *As you are going, make disciples* Jesus says in Matthew 28:20, so whatever else we may say, if we are to see a great ingathering of the harvest of lost souls, **we must go!**

It is tempting, at this moment, to just give a rousing invitation and leave, with all of us going into all our worlds to witness for Christ. That would be a great thing, and I will get there soon in my teaching, but I do not think we can start or stop there. Look back again at our text as we continue to look for answers to our question: **What must we do that can give us hope for a great ingathering of the harvest?**

I will not spend the time to fully develop the next things we can note from this passage of scripture, but I do want you to see some other truths modeled by Jesus. You will notice He was *teaching* and *preaching the gospel of the kingdom*. His textbook was what we would term the Old Testament, and in it He lived and from it He taught and preached. Our success in seeing a grand gathering of the harvest is clearly connected to the seed of God's Word being planted – indeed, broadcast – into our worlds! I have already been saying this for weeks, but I do not hesitate to say it again: The church in America is praying for a harvest, having never planted the seed! It is my desire and my goal to lead this congregation into the greatest season of seed-planting we have ever known! If there is going to be a great ingathering of the harvest, there must be the sowing of the seed of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The text also points us to the power of God at work in and through Jesus. He was *healing every sickness and every disease among the people*. The Word of God was accompanied by the power of God, and I believe He still has the same power today. I believe we can speak His word and anticipate that it will be accompanied by His power! If we hope for a great ingathering of the harvest, there must be the accompaniment of God's power!

Look at verse 36: *He saw the multitudes*, which is important! It is possible to look without seeing! (We do it all the time.) He saw they were *wearied and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd*. How do you think He sees America? What would He say is the State of the Union? Then we read that *He was moved with compassion* – he felt something in His gut that compelled action! Aren't you glad? May God give us His passion and His compassion! We will not see a great ingathering of the harvest until we see a great increase of compassion! We must really care!

Now we come to two very important verses. In verse 37, he says to the disciples: *The harvest truly is plentiful*. What glorious good news! The harvest is there and it is bountiful, but it is in the field. May I say this clearly: If there is no ingathering of a grand harvest in Southwest Missouri, it will not be because there is no harvest! The harvest here is plentiful! But then, the bad news: *the laborers are few*. Jesus had been doing it all by Himself, and He knew that needed to change. What does He think as He looks at our world? What does He think as He looks at your world? A song writer said it like this: *There is peace and contentment in the Father's House today. Lots of food on the table and no one is turned away. There is singing and laughing as the hours pass by, but a hush calms the singing as the Father sadly cries: My house is full, but my field is empty. Who will go and work for me today? It seems my children all want to stay around my table; but no one wants to work in my field, no one wants to work in my field.*

So what is the remedy? The last verse of this text is the first thing we must do! *Pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest!* We might expect the first imperative to be “go,” and Jesus does say that. We might think He would say “preach” or “teach” or “heal” or “love,” but He says *PRAY!* As you go, pray! As you teach, pray! As you preach, pray! As you minister, pray! As you love, pray! As you see the multitude, pray! First of all and most of all, pray! It is God who sends and it is God who saves! Pray!

O. Hallesby contends that ‘prayer is the most important work in the Kingdom of God. It is a labor for which there is no substitute in the kingdom of God.’ ‘We can do more than pray after we have prayed,’ says A.J. Gordon, ‘but we cannot do more than pray until we have prayed.’

If we want to see an unprecedented ingathering of the harvest, we must pray!