

THE GREAT DEPRESSION  
AND SOUTHERN BAPTIST SPIRITUAL RECREATION

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During the Great Depression, leaders in the Southern Baptist Convention interacted with the idea and the problem of leisure in indirect and subtle ways. The SBC sought to avoid problematic uses of leisure through its organized system of denominational activities and organizations. These organizations, such as the Baptist Training Union, the Baptist Brotherhood, and the Women's Missionary Union, were aimed at encouraging religious orthodoxy and social conservatism. Throughout the Depression the Southern Baptist Convention effectively preserved its orthodoxy and evangelistic zeal, but the growth of leisure called for new recreational methods to attain the expressed spiritual ends. Southern Baptist organization and adaptation during the thirties allowed the Convention to experience numerical growth throughout the fiscal constraints of the Depression, and also sowed the seeds for the growth of the SBC in the latter half of the twentieth century.

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In the United States, the interwar period of the twentieth century was a time of economic growth and severe decline. For many, the material gain of the nation was cause for celebration and optimism. For a few, the growth of materialism and commercial consumerism was a cause of concern for the direction of American morals and values. The onset of the Great Depression drained the optimism of the nation and swelled the camp of those concerned about more than just economic livelihood of the nation. At the end of 1929, as international financial stagnation was beginning to affect the American market, President Herbert Hoover appointed the Research Committee on Social Trends. This group of social scientists, whose general aim was “to see where social stresses are occurring and where major efforts should be undertaken to deal with them constructively,” produced their findings in 1933 in a two volume work titled, *Recent Social Trends*.<sup>100</sup> The summary of the committee’s findings lists a number of problematic trends in the United States, one of which was the recent growth in the amount of leisure time. Industrialization combined with government regulation meant people were working less hours to provide for their basic needs. The problem was not the number of leisure hours, but how people might choose to make use of their non-working hours. In other words, “How best to use growing leisure hours is an individual problem in which organized society has a large stake.”<sup>101</sup>

In *The March of Spare Time: The Problem and Promise of Leisure in the Great Depression*, Susan Currell describes how the economic crisis of the thirties gave rise to

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<sup>100</sup> President’s Research Committee on Social Trends, *Recent Social Trend in the United States: Report of the President’s Research Committee on Social Trends*, 2 vols. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1933), v..

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, li.

greater concern over American leisure. Her discussion centers on “leisure professionals, academics, and intellectuals [who] attempted to invest themselves with status and authority to guide and reeducate people” on the proper use of leisure.<sup>102</sup> Ultimately, for Currell, “recreation reform of the thirties was a last-ditch attempt to stem the tide of changing social roles and mores associated with increased sexual liberty and social mobility. At the same time, it was also an attempt to create a better society outside of the capitalist work ethic that had dominated life for the past century.”<sup>103</sup> She argues that those most concerned with the problem of leisure during the Depression decade were a veiled force of social conservatism, or less euphemistically, contributed to class and gender oppression. Leisure reformers, often unknowingly, sought to solve the problems of lower class and urban America by instilling traditional middle class values through a type of regulation that would help Americans choose the “right” form of leisure. Currell makes it clear that authorities in government and academia were interested in the “problem” of leisure.

Leisure was not a new issue in the thirties, but it did expand from a professional interest into a topic of national and popular concern. Warren Susman writes,

The sense of the problematic quality of leisure in the modern world is no more effectively dramatized than in the enormous growth of the literature on the subject. The leading bibliography lists, roughly, 20 items published in the period of 1900-1909. The decade between 1910 and 1919 produced almost 50 new titles; that between 1920 and 1929 about 200. But the period between 1930 and 1939 witnessed the publication of some 450 titles—with almost 100 more added between 1940 and 1945. (The war decade in fact saw a significant decrease in the number of titles produced.)<sup>104</sup>

Currell reiterates this point: “By the mid-thirties, concerns over leisure were ubiquitous.

The trickle of books and articles turned into a torrent, and the debate about American

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<sup>102</sup> Susan Currell, *The March of Spare Time: The Problem and Promise of Leisure in the Great Depression* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 29.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

<sup>104</sup> Warren Susman, ed., *Culture and Commitment, 1929-1945* (New York: George Brazillier, 1973), 83.

leisure raged in all areas of the popular and academic media until the end of the decade.”<sup>105</sup>

If leisure was an issue that received considerable popular attention, and also was a concern of academics and political authorities, how did religious authorities respond to this same issue, the problematic use of leisure? If the industrialization, unemployment, and government regulation of the thirties all contributed to an increase in leisure time, how did those in control of religious institutions respond to this shift? As the sociologist Steiner notes in *Recent Social Trends*, leisure’s “compelling influence has brought about significant adjustments in government, industry, business, education and religion...Churches formerly confining themselves rigidly to the spiritual side of life are now active in promoting recreational programs.”<sup>106</sup>

There are numerous religious institutions worth looking at during this period, but I have chosen to focus on the Southern Baptist Convention for a few reasons. First, the Southern Baptists represent an interesting middle ground in the history of American religion. Baptists are commonly and correctly labeled as theologically conservative, but they also attempted to maintain their distance from the Fundamentalist movement. The SBC was continually defining itself against encroachments of a liberal society, but also fighting to avoid cultural isolation and religious marginalization. Leisure provides one opportunity to demonstrate this interesting religious dance with culture. Second, the Southern Baptist Convention represents one of the largest protestant denominations in the thirties. In 1932 the SBC represented just over four million church members in eighteen

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<sup>105</sup> *The March of Spare Time*, 9.

<sup>106</sup> *Recent Social Trends*, 912.

states and the District of Columbia.<sup>107</sup> Finally, Southern Baptists experienced tremendous growth in the post-war period. Throughout the latter half of the twentieth century the Southern Baptist denomination produced some of the nation's most influential figures, such as Billy Graham and President Jimmy Carter. They also maintained cultural vitality and numerical growth, two factors that declined in a number of other mainline denominations. For these reasons, the goal of this paper is to discover how leaders in the Southern Baptist Convention responded to the increase of leisure time within the constraints of the economic hardships of the Depression decade.

Before getting to the issue of leisure, a brief numerical overview of the SBC during the thirties will be helpful. In 1929 the SBC claimed 3,770,645 members and reported over 39 million dollars in annual giving. By 1933 annual giving had plummeted to 23 million dollars, roughly a 40% decrease in financial giving. This was the financial low point of the Depression for the SBC. After this reports of annual giving steadily increased, and in 1940 the SBC churches received 40 million dollars, essentially recovering back to the 1929 level of giving. While financial giving took a sharp dive and eventually recovered, membership in SBC churches grew steadily throughout the decade. Each year the SBC reported an increase, and in 1940 this number had climbed to over 5 million members. The SBC experienced a severe financial crisis in the thirties, but this seems to have had a minimal effect on church membership.<sup>108</sup>

As for the issue of leisure, a good deal of the literature leaves the term itself undefined, assuming the audiences' intuitive understanding. Yet when "leisure" is

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<sup>107</sup> *Southern Baptist Handbook*, (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1933), 70. More Specifically, 4,066,140 members in Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, New Mexico, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia.

<sup>108</sup> Southern Baptist Convention, *Handbook* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1929-1941).

defined it is described broadly as non-working hours, or the time to be used at one's own discretion. Perhaps the author of *The Challenge of Leisure* had it right, when in 1934 he wrote, "That simple phrase 'New Leisure,' comes to depression-worn mankind with almost irresistible seduction, and it is easily adapted to almost any preconceived purpose, especially because no one seems to understand exactly what it means."<sup>109</sup> In this paper I take the view articulated by C. Delisle Burns, who in 1932 wrote, "For the purpose in view, spare time or leisure must be taken in its most inclusive sense. It is understood here to include all that part of life which is not occupied in working for a living."<sup>110</sup> Recreation is also a term that some authors use interchangeably with leisure, and others define as a sub-category of leisure. When appropriate these differences will be pointed out, but in general I have found that a precise definition of leisure or recreation is not to be expected.

Did Southern Baptist leaders perceive the Depression as presenting a problem of leisure? To be sure, idle hands were always the devil's work, but was the SBC concerned that the economic downturn would increase the number of those idle hands?

There were several branches of the SBC that were positioned to observe and deal with the problem of leisure. Most obvious is the Convention's Social Service Committee. The purpose of the Social Service Committee was somewhat similar to that of the President's Research Committee on Social Trends in that it was to report on social issues of the day relevant to the work of Southern Baptists. The Committee was created in 1914, and then merged with the Committee on Temperance in 1915.<sup>111</sup> For this reason, it is not

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<sup>109</sup> Arthur Newton Pack, *The Challenge of Leisure* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1936), 4.

<sup>110</sup> *Leisure in the Modern World* (New York: The Century Co., 1932), 5.

<sup>111</sup> Southern Baptist Convention, *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1935), 24.

surprising that much of the content in the reports of the Social Service Committee deal with prohibition and repeal. In fact, to this day the SBC continues to produce annual resolutions that state their “total opposition to the manufacturing, advertising, distributing, and consuming of alcoholic beverages.”<sup>112</sup> Prohibition was the prominent social issue for Southern Baptists for years, and when President Roosevelt reversed the ban on liquor in 1933 this only escalated their prior concern. While liquor was the pervasive issue during the thirties, the Social Service Committee also reported on a number of other issues. The most consistent examples include industrial relations (labor), lynching, gambling, divorce, race relations, and motion pictures.

Throughout the Depression the Social Service Committee sought to expand its work and employ a full-time representative. In 1931 the Committee reported,

The need is urgent for larger and more adequate financial budget and greater activities by Southern Baptists in the broad field of social service. Prohibition law observance and enforcement, the promotion of peace, child-welfare, race relations and other subjects in the realm of applied Christianity ought to have a larger and more sustained interest and attention from us than they are receiving.<sup>113</sup>

In 1932 the Committee reported again on the necessity for expanding the program of the Social Service Committee, citing attention given by other denominational bodies to social issues, and the need for Southern Baptists to support “principles of applied Christianity and [exercise] influence for civic righteousness and social purity and health.”<sup>114</sup> The Social Service Committee did express concern for the way people used their non-working hours during the Depression, by censoring liquor, gambling, and the movies, and also expressing approval of the Boy Scouts. However, these findings were not connected to an increase in leisure time. The Social Service Committee was interested in persuading

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<sup>112</sup> 2006 SBC Resolutions: [www.sbc.net/resolutions](http://www.sbc.net/resolutions).

<sup>113</sup> *Annual* (1931), 128.

<sup>114</sup> *Annual* (1932), 97.

the government to apply stricter regulations to strong drink and the content in motion pictures, but not regulate leisure time. In this way the SBC viewed government regulation as preventative of social problems, not prescriptive of the proper use of time.

Along with the Social Service Committee, the Home Mission Board was also in a position to comment on the increase of leisure, but also did not respond to the issue. In 1931, in the face of a drastically shrinking budget, the Home Mission Board sought to clarify its mission, that of “majoring on preaching the Gospel to the Foreigners, the Indians, the Negroes, in the congested centers of our Homeland, and in Cuba and Panama.”<sup>115</sup> In short, the Board was focused on evangelizing immigrants and non-whites, and much of their work was centered in urban industrial cities in America, the very same places where leisure reformers found evidence for their diagnosis of the leisure problem. The Board was aware of the social and economic changes taking place during the decade: “Home Missions today are set in a new social and economic order created by the changing conditions in which we live.”<sup>116</sup> Leisure may be implied in these social changes, but it is never mentioned in the Board’s annual reports between 1930 and 1940 as an explicit problem to deal with.

So with the Home Mission Board, it is unclear whether or not they perceived an increase in the problem of leisure during the Great Depression. It is more likely that the issue of leisure was seen as one of many problems stemming from a lack of Christian faith in individuals and groups, and so the focus was on spreading the Baptist Gospel, not dealing with leisure. “There is no redemption for man apart from the atonement of Christ. Social adjustments do not heal the ills of the human race. Education falls short of the

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<sup>115</sup> *Annual* (1931), 279. 1931 SBC Annual, 279.

<sup>116</sup> *Annual* (1935), 253.

spiritual needs of man if it ignores the great Teacher of Nazareth. Christ and him crucified alone can redeem and save the world.”<sup>117</sup>

In fact, throughout the thirties the SBC struggled to define exactly how the church should relate to the “social” dimension of life. Christian religion should have an impact on the social life of individuals and of the nation, but it seems that some in the SBC were hesitant to mix the religious with the social, fearing a dilution of “true” or “pure” religion. This tension over the relationship of Southern Baptist religion to those things falling under the broad category of “social” became especially evident after the Convention appointed a *Committee to Consider the Advisability of Creating an Agency of Social Research* in May of 1933.<sup>118</sup> In 1935 the Committee reported their findings to the Convention. Because “we are living in a time of great social unrest,” exemplified by moral confusion, Southern industrialization, and the race issue, the SBC should establish a Bureau of Social Research with a salaried Secretary of Social Research and an annual budget of \$5000.<sup>119</sup> The Bureau of Social Research should be different and independent of the Social Service Committee, but both should collaborate to produce “an annual report presenting illustrative material in case studies and suggesting a basis for an aggressive and far-reaching denominational program.” In sum, Southern Baptists “should take the leadership in a program of social reconstruction, that would inspire the whole of Christendom to seek to apply the gospel to Christ to all our social problems.” After hearing the report at the Convention a motion was made to defer creation of the Bureau for one year and to enlarge the committee “by the appointment of one additional

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<sup>117</sup> *Annual* (1937), 253.

<sup>118</sup> *Annual* (1935), 57.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 57-59.

member from each state.” This new enlarged committee would report back to the Convention next year.<sup>120</sup>

*The Committee on the Advisability of Creating a Social Research Bureau*, with its slightly altered name and nineteen new members reported back to the Convention in 1936, but this time with both a majority and a dissenting minority report. The majority report had changed in that it mentioned no specific budget amount, and that instead of an independent bureau, the Convention should expand the work of the Social Service Commission “in order to meet more adequately the moral and social problems for which we feel an increasing burden and responsibility.” The minority report concluded, “We recommend that the work of the Social Service Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention be not enlarged, as proposed by the majority report, but be continued as formerly under the Convention’s standing committee on Temperance and Social Service.”<sup>121</sup>

Even more revealing than the split decision of the committee is the way they chose to preface their reports. Both reports contain a “preamble,” or what could be called a confession of faith, something that is not found in any other annual committee reports to the Convention. Both begin by stating, “In making its report to the Convention your committee would first of all make clear the spirit and faith in which the report has been written.” The report continues, “We believe the gospel of Jesus Christ is a gospel of individual salvation,--that men find forgiveness, redemption, eternal life through a personal acceptance of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. In him alone is eternal life.” Both preambles are identical with the exception of the first clause in the following

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> *Annual* (1936), 38-39.

sentence, which closes the majority report's preamble: "*Not therefore as a substitute for the gospel, but as an expression of our devotion to the gospel, to humanity and the kingdom of God, and our confidence in its power to redeem all of life, we bring the following report.*"<sup>122</sup>

The defensive posture of both reports is clear, and one might speculate that the defensiveness is the result of the dissenting opinions. What both reports communicate is a rejection of the idea that salvation is a product of social change, and are responding to the Social Gospel movement of the teens and twenties. The Social Gospel was essentially the idea that salvation is societal, and criticized the traditional idea of personal salvation. Richard Fox writes,

Social Gospel liberals tended to elevate "social salvation" over individual salvation—viewing the latter as a hopelessly smug and niggling concern in an era of vast social dislocation and open-ended opportunities for shaping history and society—so they placed the social formation of individual consciousness above the accountability of individuals for their own moral choices.<sup>123</sup>

For the SBC, salvation was not social and moral decisions were not circumstantial, they were matters of individual choice in which there was no defensible justification for rejection. Keith Harper has written about Southern Baptists and the Social Gospel movement prior to the Great Depression. Though he analyzes a previous time period, the accuracy of his description of Southern Baptist beliefs extends into the 1930's and beyond. Harper writes, Southern Baptists "believed institutional reform was superficial and insisted that the only way to create a better world was by changing its people's

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<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 37-38. Italics added.

<sup>123</sup> "The Culture of Liberal Protestant Progressivism, 1975-1925," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol 23., No. 3, Religion and History. (Winter 1993), 655.

character. They sought to convert souls and in so doing, change society by furnishing it with better, that is to say converted, people.”<sup>124</sup>

In light of these views, it was important for these committee members to affirm their conviction that the Christian gospel did not change in the face of social problems, but would change the problems themselves. The reports of the Social Service Commission during this time also are prefaced with such confessions of orthodoxy, leading to the conclusion that the relationship between the religious and social dimensions of life were not decided for leaders of the SBC in the thirties. So in the end, the reports of *The Committee on the Advisability of Creating a Social Research Bureau* were tabled, the Bureau was never created, and the Social Service Commission was not expanded.

Did leaders in the SBC perceive a problem with the increase in leisure during the thirties? The leisure issue was not prominent enough to receive direct attention from the Convention and its organizations, but that does not mean the SBC was blind to the national discussion of leisure. A number of peripheral references to leisure in SBC publications make it clear that leisure was such a prevalent topic during the era that it could hardly be missed. The January, 1934 issue of *The Sunday School Builder* includes an article on the “Ministries of a Church Library,” in which the author, a Baptist minister from North Carolina, writes, “Leisure is a monster burden on the mind of many people. Such a burden may be relieved with a book in the hand. With the proper reading matter one may fully enjoy the fascinating charm, the most picturesque and panoramic scenes of

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<sup>124</sup> *The Quality of Mercy: Southern Baptists and Social Christianity, 1890-1920* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1996), 11-12.

nature.”<sup>125</sup> In May of 1934, Blanche Mays from Jonesboro, Arkansas wrote an article in *The Monthly B.Y.P.U. Magazine* (Baptist Young People’s Union) titled, “Building a Recreation Program for the Year.” Mays wrote the following under the sub-heading, “The Problem of the Church,”

This fact, coupled with the great amount of leisure time which each person now has causes the church and its several organizations to realize that a definite program should be built to take care of the leisure time of its members. It is the exceptional opportunity of the church to survey the needs of its members, then to view the recreational field of today, and finally provide suitable leisure-time activities for its members either by selection from the present recreational field or by creation of suitable activities.<sup>126</sup>

Also, in the same publication, Dr. John L. Hill wrote a regular column for Baptist young people titled “Purely Personal.” Hill was the editor of Broadman Press, the SBC’s book publishing press, and in a column titled “Using Leisure” he wrote,

One of the obvious developments of modern society is the reduction of hours of required work. With the possible exception of students who may go to school the year round, the tendency is to reduce for workers in general the number of days in the week and the number of hours in the day. The five day week is already a reality in many lines of activity and promises general acceptance; the eight hour day, of course, is universally recognized as a long one. The practical result of such a trend is to release an ever increasing amount of time for recreation or leisure. This result in itself is not bad; no great civilization has ever been built by people without leisure.<sup>127</sup>

These few examples demonstrate how when Southern Baptists did explicitly refer to the issue of leisure they referred to it as an issue that was “obvious” and “on the mind of many people.”

It is highly unlikely that the increase and problematic use of leisure was unperceived by SBC leaders, but instead the case that the specific issue was mostly unexpressed. This can be explained by the previous discussion of the problematic relationship between the religious and social dimensions for Southern Baptists, and also the focus placed on other issues, such as liquor, gambling, and motion pictures. While

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<sup>125</sup> January, 1934, (Nashville), 16.

<sup>126</sup> *The Monthly BYPU Magazine* (Nashville), 10.

<sup>127</sup> *Purely Personal* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1937), 113.

these issues provide specific examples of the problematic use of leisure, the goal was often securing government regulation in the specific area, and in general the problem was not leisure time but sin.

If leisure time did increase during the Depression decade, then how did the Southern Baptist Convention respond to this change? My contention is that the clearest way Southern Baptists responded to leisure, sometimes consciously and sometimes instinctively, was to provide for their members through existing denominational activities and organizations. Most of these SBC responses were undertaken by the Sunday School Board, and they provided for the leisure time of Southern Baptists by setting up organizations for religious education, personal devotion, and community service. During the Great Depression, the Sunday School Board effectively combined recreational and leisurely activities with denominational organizations and program content. This combination was not new for Baptists, but it was a way in which the SBC both preserved its religious orthodoxy and also adapted to the shifting social and cultural environment of the Depression era South. Ultimately, the structure of SBC organizations allowed them to cope well with the problem of leisure during the Depression, and set them up for the growth and expansion of the post-war years. The rest of this paper will focus on the particular denominational organizations and how they provided for Southern Baptist leisure throughout the 1930's.

As mentioned, a good portion of Southern Baptist activity came under the direction of the Sunday School Board. The SBC had four major boards, the Foreign Mission Board, the Home Mission Board, the Relief and Annuity Board, and the Sunday School Board. The Sunday School Board oversaw the editorial departments in charge of

publishing denominational books, periodicals, and tracts, and also directed the primary Baptist educational organizations.

In 1925 the Sunday School Board created the Department of Daily Vacation Bible Schools in order to promote vacation bible schools in Southern Baptist churches. Their aim was for the church to effectively provide for the free or idle time of children during the summer vacation. The Great Depression did not alter the amount of this leisure time, but it did sap financial resources and jobs that might have previously occupied a child's summer vacation. In 1925, the first year of VBS promotion, Southern Baptist churches reported 209 schools.<sup>128</sup> In 1929 this number had almost doubled, with 409 vacation bible schools.<sup>129</sup> However, in 1938 there were 3,548 schools with an enrollment of 375,455 youths (up from around forty thousand in 1929).<sup>130</sup> In short, vacation bible schools experienced tremendous growth in SBC churches during the thirties, and they were also a way in which churches provided for children's leisure time with a combination of religious and recreational activities.

Another way in which the Sunday School Board provided for Southern Baptist leisure was through their operation of the SBC property and summer assemblies in Ridgecrest, North Carolina. The Convention's property at Ridgecrest provided a great opportunity for Southern Baptists to take a summer vacation that included religious programming. By the early years of the Depression, Ridgecrest had become a financial liability for the SBC. In 1931, the Ridgecrest Assembly was a problem that no one was eager to take care of:

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<sup>128</sup> *Annual* (1935), 338.

<sup>129</sup> *Annual* (1930), 377.

<sup>130</sup> *Annual* (1939), 360.

The Board [Sunday School Board] has continued to conduct The Ridgecrest Assembly in connection with the Executive Committee, who are responsible for the property and for the payment of the debts. The present summer will bring to a completion the period for which we agreed to render this service. At a recent meeting, however, our Board agreed to extend the period of responsibility for the program for two years more, hoping that by this time the financial situation would be so much improved as to make it possible to plan for the future disposition of this property.<sup>131</sup>

Again, in 1934 the Sunday School Board reported that they only agreed to operate Ridgecrest “at the earnest request of the Executive Committee,” but in doing so, there goal was “to make this assembly a denominational asset, and not merely a recreational center.”<sup>132</sup> Full page advertisements for Ridgecrest encouraged Southern Baptists to “Combine Spiritual and Recreational Values,” and listed the names of recreational directors along with prominent speakers and teachers.<sup>133</sup> In 1934, the worst year of the Depression for the SBC, Ridgecrest made a profit for the first time in the decade. The Sunday School Board concluded, “Ridgecrest’s problems are not all solved, but we have demonstrated that it can be made a valuable denominational asset.”<sup>134</sup>

The financial growth and popular appeal of Ridgecrest soon required expansion of the facility, and in 1937 the Sunday School Board approved funding of \$60,000 for the construction of a new auditorium to seat 2,400 people, the expansion of the dining hall, and a number of other improvements.<sup>135</sup> In the face of financial hardship, the Sunday School Board designed summer programs at the Ridgecrest Assembly that served SBC leadership in its educational values, and members in its recreational opportunity.

In actuality, the summer schedule at Ridgecrest did not change significantly during the decade. Each annual report presents a summer schedule for Ridgecrest, lasting

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<sup>131</sup> *Annual* (1931), 316.

<sup>132</sup> *Annual* (1934), 279.

<sup>133</sup> For examples see *The Sunday School Builder*, June, 1934, p. 15; and *BYPJU Magazine*, August, 1934, inside cover.

<sup>134</sup> *Annual* (1935), 300.

<sup>135</sup> *Annual* (1938), 314.

from the first or second week of June until the end of August. The 1935 report explains some of the details and reasons behind the schedule. Again, the Sunday School Board states its purpose that Ridgecrest would not operate “simply as a hotel or summer resort.” So, the summer program begins with “three conferences vitally related to our denominational life, and which draw great crowds of young people.” These entail a Southwide Baptist Student Retreat, the Young Woman’s Auxiliary Camp, and the North Carolina Baptist Training Union Conference. “Then follows a period of the summer when few people desire to go to meetings of this character. This period is filled by certain meetings of our own,” such as the Sunday School Board Conferences, the Summer Sunday School Conference, and the Southwide Baptist Training Union Assembly. Then two missions conferences, because “many people [are] eager for a closer touch with our Mission Boards.” Finally, “[a]t the last period, when people generally seek a vacation we have a great meeting, equally an old-fashioned camp meeting.”<sup>136</sup> The Ridgecrest schedule continued to be a mix of Baptist organizational retreats and board conferences. However, in 1939 a new “Recreation Week” was placed right in the middle of the summer schedule.

Ridgecrest also allowed Southern Baptist recreational leaders a chance to legitimize their positions. Key leaders such as T.B. Maston and Agnes Durant Pylant served as Directors of Recreation at Ridgecrest during the thirties.<sup>137</sup> Maston and Pylant were highly influential in the SBC’s developing view of leisure. A more detailed description of these figures will be presented below. The Ridgecrest Assembly was more than a vacation hot spot for Southern Baptists, its financial records indicate the growing

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<sup>136</sup> *Annual* (1935), 300.

<sup>137</sup> *The Monthly BYPU Magazine* (Nashville) August, 1934, inside cover.

importance of leisure, and the camp itself created an opportunity for key leaders in the SBC to meet and exchange ideas about a variety of topics including recreation.

Another way in which the Sunday School Board provided for the leisure time of Southern Baptists was through the Baptist Training Union Department (BTU), which functioned largely for the purpose of denominational education. The goal of the BTU was to prepare church members, especially Baptist youth, for active involvement and informed participation in the local church and the larger Convention. Prior to June of 1934, the BTU was known as the Baptist Young People's Union, but was then combined with the growing Baptist Adult's Union, and the new name became appropriate. "The rapid expansion of the B.A.U. made it essential to adopt a more general name which would include the B.Y.P.U.'s and B.A.U.'s. We had had the name 'Baptist Training Union' in mind for the past four years, waiting until the time was ripe for proposing it."<sup>138</sup> The reported growth of the BAU's during the Depression is an interesting and expected correlation with the increase in unemployment and in leisure hours, but the causality of the relationship needs to be further explored. Nevertheless, the BTU did provide denominational education and structure to those who desired it through their study courses.

In 1936 the BTU kicked off its "Five-Year Promotional Program," aiming to "make substantial progress in the enlistment of all our people in all our church and denominational life through a permanently effective means of enlistment," and to "fortify our people with the truth and equip them better through Christian training to meet the issues—social, economic, political and religious—of the complex age in which we live." Numerically, the goal was to have 15,000 training unions and one million members

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<sup>138</sup> *Annual* (1935), 332.

enrolled by January 1, 1941. These lofty goals would require the number of existing training unions to double and enrollment to increase by fifty percent.<sup>139</sup> In fact, in 1941 the SBC reported 954,179 people enrolled in BTU's, just under the goal of one million.<sup>140</sup> This figure implies that the promotional program was successful despite not reaching its original goal. More importantly, the "Five Year Promotional Program" demonstrates how SBC leaders saw the Training Unions as a crucial and effective means of disseminating of the Convention's ideas and policies. The BTU's were viewed as a vital part of sustaining Southern Baptist life, and a closer look at the content they produced is revealing of how SBC leadership sought to occupy the time of church members.

The BTU was divided into junior, intermediate, senior, and adult sections, each with its own "Study Course." Additionally, there was a BTU Administration Course, for those "who may want to prepare for places of leadership in the Training Union."<sup>141</sup> Courses consisted of a list of books for which a seal was rewarded for each book that was read. A number of these books, all of which were published by the SBC's Broadman Press, relate specifically to recreation and leisure in the church.

*Investments in Christian Living* was published in 1930 and was a constant in the BTU's curriculum through the thirties. Written by Dr. William Rigell, the book includes a short introduction by J.E. Lambdin, who was the Secretary and Editor of the BTU throughout the decade. In this introduction Lambdin explains the purpose of the book:

Youth is the investment period of life. The world offers its alluring fields of investment, and each life has available resources to invest. Nothing could be more important to the young Christian than that all these resources be invested in the fields which will yield the richest returns. The field of Christian living is the greatest investment field in the world for all the elements of life which have eternal value.

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<sup>139</sup> *Annual* (1936), 299.

<sup>140</sup> *Annual* (1942).

<sup>141</sup> *Annual* (1936), 302.

The book itself is divided into eight chapters, each an explication of how and why the various areas of life—time, intelligence, money, and love, for example—should be “invested.” Chapter Two, “The Investment of Time,” includes sections on “The Wrong Use of Time” and “The Right Use of Time,” which are telling in some ways of Rigell’s and the SBC’s views of leisure and recreation at the beginning of the Great Depression.

Rigell writes, “Millions of people all over the world are demanding fewer work days per year and minimum hours per day. There are but a pitiful few who are seriously considering what to do with that time when they get it.”<sup>142</sup> Those things listed as the wrong or poor investment of time include “unpardonable idleness,” “the modern dance,” “the devastating use of the automobile,” and “moving pictures, cards, and trashy literature.”

As for the right use of time, Rigell proscribes six areas in which young Baptists should strive to invest their time. Four of these areas, prayer, worship, reading the bible, and service, are straightforward and what one would expect from the SBC. Rigell’s fifth description of the right use of time is time which is focused on the present. Daydreaming or thinking about the future is often an excuse to squander away the present time. Those who invest their time wisely will be those who take action in the present and do not let the worries of tomorrow impact the decisions of today . In tension with this idea is Rigell’s sixth category of the right investment of time, “meditation.” “Young Christians especially should take time to be quiet...The lives of the great men of religion remind us that quietude helps to find God and empowers life.”<sup>143</sup> Rigell illustrates this point by referring to three religious figures, including Moses and the Apostle Paul. Surprisingly

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<sup>142</sup> *Investments in Christian Living* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1930), 31.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

he cites Mohammed as the third example of someone who properly used his time meditating.

Although one does not like the name of Mohammed or believe in the religion he taught, one has to admit he was a man of tremendous influence with the “one-God idea” and with the sword. And why? When but a barefoot boy, Mohammed listened to the thrilling and appalling stories, told from passing caravans, of the dire conditions of the then known world. He retired, dreamed and meditated under the Arabian stars, scorching sun and desert winds. When he arose from his silence he moved the world.<sup>144</sup>

In many ways, *Investments in Christian Living* presents the archetypal description of how SBC leaders viewed the wrong and right use of leisure time in the early years of the Depression.

*Investments* also makes clear that there is a difference between wasted time, recreation, and church work. Wasted time, or idleness, is obviously an improper use of leisure, recreation is viewed positively, except when it is an obstruction to doing church work. At the end of the second chapter there is a section of “Suggestions for Further Study and Work” designed for the BTU classes. One suggested assignment is to construct a chart that demonstrates “how much time each member of the class has invested in church work during the past month.” Then “find the individual total and the class total. Make another chart showing the totals devoted to recreational activities, and compare the two.”<sup>145</sup> As the decade progressed, Rigell’s black and white divide between recreation and church work began to gray.

In 1935 the SBC published *Planning a Life*, which was immediately included in the Baptist Training Union’s curriculum. *Planning a Life* was written by Dr. Henry Eugene Watters, who was then the president of Jonesboro Baptist College in Jonesboro, Arkansas. The purpose of Watters’ book is primarily to lay out a process to help young

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid, 41.

people choose a profession. Chapter titles include, “Making Vocational and Personal Analyses,” “Taking One’s Mental Measure,” “Choosing a Business Partner,” and “Getting the Job.” Apart from choosing one’s profession, Watters includes two other chapters which he believed were important to “planning a life”—“Choosing a Mate” and “Avocations.”

The chapter on avocations begins with the regretful words of a “prominent” editor, “I am here in the hospital paying the penalty for the sin of having no avocation.”<sup>146</sup> As Watters observes, “Everybody knows that play and recreation are necessities for children, but few seem to know that both body and mind must have this relaxation on down to old age.”<sup>147</sup> Watters cites industrialism as the cause of the growing importance of avocations: “Modern industrialism has really done three things for society: increased the need for recreation, increased the time for it, and made possible the means for enjoying it.”<sup>148</sup> In fact, his discussion of avocations mirrors the arguments and concerns of many of the social scientists of the day, describing leisure as “one of the greatest problems for our social thinkers.” Just as people need to be taught how to work, now people need to be instructed how to play in order to “restore to society the development of individuality which the machine tends to take away, and to save society from disaster which must follow if its leisure time be spent in idleness. Morals, religion, health, and public safety are at stake.”<sup>149</sup>

The importance of *Planning of Life* is that it describes leisure and recreation as necessities to a healthy modern life. Earlier, recreation was a good use of leisure, but

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<sup>146</sup> *Planning a Life* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1935), 114.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*

now it is essential because “[w]ork strains and weakens; play relaxes and stimulates.”<sup>150</sup> Avocations, recreation, and leisure are viewed as important to personality development and even an important tool in maintaining healthy marriages. “How happy is the man who, after a hectic day in the office, can rush home to find the woman he loves waiting to go with him to the golf course, to the hunting lodge, to the little fishing stream, on a motor trip, or to some other recreation!”<sup>151</sup> Previously Rigell had warned against the dangers of recreational use of the automobile both because of safety and because it was a waste of time. Watters on the other hand views motor trips as a justifiable leisure because of its positive impact on other important areas of life, such as marriage and friendships. Watters’ chapter on avocations broadens the influence of leisure to affect all areas of one’s life, blurring the boundary between recreation and church work.

In 1937 the SBC press published *A Handbook for Church Recreation Leaders*, written by T.B. Maston. Thomas Buford Maston would become a progressive and influential member of the SBC, and he is known more for his work opposing racial segregation in the fifties and sixties. *A Handbook for Church Recreation Leaders* was Maston’s first book, and it was written during a time in which he was studying for his doctoral degree from Yale, teaching social ethics at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, and working summers at the Ridgecrest Assembly.<sup>152</sup> For this reason, Maston was a key figure in translating the works and ideas of leisure professionals into the religious language of Southern Baptists.

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid, 117.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid, 122.

<sup>152</sup> For a basic biographical outline see *Perspectives on Applied Christianity: Essays in Honor of Thomas Buford Maston*. Ed., William M. Tillman, Jr.

Maston's book was written as part of the curriculum for the Baptist Training Union's Administration Course. Beginning with a chapter titled "The Bible and Play," Maston argues that the Old Testament demonstrates that games and sports were existent aspects of ancient Jewish life. He then moves on to the writings of the Apostle Paul and the life of Jesus in order to discuss references to athletic events and the social life in the New Testament. Concerning Jesus, Maston writes, he "had normal, healthy attitudes toward life. He had a well-developed, properly balanced social nature. Jesus recognized the need for rest and relaxation."<sup>153</sup> What is important for Maston is that Jesus used all of his social life, including his recreation and leisure time, for a specific purpose, that of teaching "spiritual truths."<sup>154</sup>

Maston then describes four areas of appropriate church recreation, though he admits "that these divisions are more or less arbitrary." The four categories of recreation are physical, intellectual, creative, and social. While each of the four categories has its advantages, Maston believes the church should be primarily concerned with social recreation, defined simply as "features such as banquets and teas, picnics and parties."<sup>155</sup> Though he discusses a number of reasons why social recreation is preferable over physical, intellectual, and creative recreation, ultimately, "One of the most distinct advantages of the social over other types of church play is that usually the social features can be utilized more definitely for educational and religious ends."<sup>156</sup> The rest of the book is a pragmatic approach on how to make social recreation a regular part of church life. Chapter titles are indicative of the practical nature of the book, and include "A

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<sup>153</sup> *A Handbook for Church Recreation Leaders* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1937), 22.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

Church Program for Social Activities,” “Ideals for Church Social Life,” “Planning a Social,” “Types of Socials,” and “Directing the Social.”

Before Maston describes what types of socials to plan and how to plan them, he lays out his reasons for recreation in the church. The essential argument of *A Handbook for Church Recreation Leaders* is that recreation and leisure *need* to be used by the church for the purposes of character development. “The use of these increased hours of leisure may and doubtless will determine largely the destiny of our civilization. This free time may be used to enrich or to debase, to build or to destroy. Which it will do will depend largely on the agencies that provide for it.”<sup>157</sup> The church cannot remain silent and leave the leisure issue to other groups and agencies if it hopes to continue to have an impact on people in the modern age. Changing times have made recreation a necessary instrument of the church, because “churches cannot achieve most effectively their educational goal—the developing of Christian character—without the utilization of play and the play method.”<sup>158</sup> Again, Maston emphasizes, “Modern churches must promote play and influence the amusement life of church members if they are to continue to be dominant factors in shaping lives.”<sup>159</sup>

This is an important conceptual shift from Rigell, who viewed church work and recreation as distinct categories which occupy church members’ time. For Maston, recreation was necessary for a healthy, balanced life, and for character and personality development. If God was concerned with healthy lives and Christian character, then the church must be concerned with recreation. All three of the books discussed above were eventually part of the Baptist Training Union curriculum at the same time, and while I

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid, 30.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 34.

have traced a pattern of development between leisure, recreation, and church work, these books did not make the predecessor obsolete in the eyes of the Sunday School Board. More work needs to be done to demonstrate how the ideas in these books, particularly Maston's *Handbook*, affected the actual workings of Southern Baptist churches during the 1930s. For now, we can say that in 1937 SBC leadership, the Sunday School Board, and the BTU were accepting of the idea that Southern Baptist churches needed to plan for the leisure time and recreational life of its members.

*A Handbook for Church Recreation Leaders* replaced *B.Y.P.U. Socials*, written in 1922 by Mrs. Herbert B. Linscott. The difference between these two works is telling of the transition taking place in the Training Union and SBC thought in general. *B.Y.P.U. Socials* contains a one page introduction which simply states, "The author tried to be very careful not to have anything detrimental to any religious organization in the book, but to furnish innocent amusement for young people."<sup>160</sup> The rest of the book contains descriptions of how to organize Recreation, previously viewed as church amusement and diversion, became a necessary instrument of church education and protection against the dangers of commercial recreation. Like the social scientists of the twenties and thirties who wrote about leisure, some in the SBC began to see recreation as more than a good time; it was now an opportunity for influence and control.

In January, 1944 the Sunday School Board authorized the creation of The Church Recreation Service, under the direction of Agnes Durant Pylant.<sup>161</sup> The official recreation department struggled to get off the ground, but was firmly established with a

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<sup>160</sup> Hilda Bates Linscott, *B.Y.P.U. Socials* (Nashville: Sunday School Board, 1922), 5.

<sup>161</sup> Robert Andrew Baker, *The Story of the Sunday School Board* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1966), 149.

budget in 1954.<sup>162</sup> Pylant published several books on recreation and the fact that the Sunday School Board appointed a woman as the head of the Church Recreation Service should not be overlooked. In 1959 she published *Church Recreation*, which she dedicated to T.B. Maston, “who opened my eyes to church recreation as a unique and challenging field of service, and who taught me the principles and techniques of leading people in a program of fun.”<sup>163</sup> The Church Recreation Service, under Pylant’s leadership, continued to train Southern Baptists at leadership conferences, published pamphlets, a periodical also titled *Church Recreation*, and developed a promotional film entitled *Leisure for the Lord*.<sup>164</sup> While leisure and recreation flourished institutionally in the SBC during the fifties and sixties, the ideas that created and nourished this growth were first developed during the Depression decade. As an individual, T.B. Maston was influential in expanding the idea of church recreation, and his work and experience at Ridgecrest Assembly and Southwestern Baptist Theological seminary brought him into contact with key figures such as J.E. Lambdin and Agnes Durant Pylant. The thirties were a time in which the SBC became increasingly accepting of recreation as an important and necessary aspect of church life, and the subsequent creation of a recreation department is evidence of the changes which had their beginnings during the interwar years.

During the Great Depression, leaders in the Southern Baptist Convention interacted with the idea and the problem of leisure in indirect and subtle ways. The SBC sought to avoid problematic uses of leisure through its organized system of denominational activities and organizations. These organizations, such as the Baptist

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 230.

<sup>163</sup> *Church Recreation* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1959), no pg. number.

<sup>164</sup> *The Story of the Sunday School Board*, 231.

Training Union, the Baptist Brotherhood, and the Women's Missionary Union, were aimed at encouraging religious orthodoxy and social conservatism. Throughout the Depression the Southern Baptist Convention effectively preserved its orthodoxy and evangelistic zeal, but the growth of leisure called for new recreational methods to attain the expressed spiritual ends. Southern Baptist organization and adaptation during the thirties allowed the Convention to experience numerical growth throughout the fiscal constraints of the Depression, and also sowed the seeds for the growth of the SBC in the latter half of the twentieth century.

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