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Vanishing Act

Alvin O. Turner

I suppose a lot of people growing up in the 1950s had it a lot rougher than I did or at least they seem to think so. They usually begin laments about their youth before I have my story half told. Maybe going to school in blackboard jungles, getting pushed into half-baked science programs after Sputnik, or having hair too curly to shape into a duck-tail or stand in a flat top, was traumatic. I know it would have been worse to have to face death or the kinds of family problems many of my friends did. Still, I wish that I had never met Brother Alfred Baylor and have never really stopped thinking about my encounter with him.

Brother Alfred was an evangelist, known across Oklahoma and the south as "the Preaching Peter of our generation." He offered the promise of good preaching and the experience of a lifetime in return for his expenses plus the offering collected during week-long revival meetings. And, in those days before televisions were common in every household, he managed to satisfy many including some who had begun as his detractors. The latter usually pointed to stylistic abuses in his speaking, the fact that his suit didn't fit, his nose turned red when he was shouting, which was most of the time, or to the similarities between his deathbed stories and those of other preachers they had heard.

Being a preacher's kid I accepted most such matters without many questions. I sensed that well-fitted clothing was somewhat suspect in preachers. Brother Alfred's suits fit worse than most, but we expected evangelists, whom we tended to rank right below angels and missionaries, to stand out a bit more than ordinary preachers. Likewise, his grammar emphasized that his preaching came from God rather than some hifalutin college. Most of us had never heard a soft-spoken preacher and assumed that the really loud ones such as Brother Alfred were just better qualified than the rest. The nose was a little distracting, but we were supposed to be focusing on his words anyway. And, I had grown up with the sense that preachers often drew from

common sources or borrowed from each other. In fact, the only thing about Brother Alfred that disturbed me in the least was that he pretended to remember me when Dad introduced us. He had only seen me one time ten years prior when I was eighteen months old.

Brother Alfred managed to erase any doubts I might have had with his first sermon entitled "And a Little Child Shall Lead Them." Somehow, he managed to convince me that I was responsible for whether or not we had revival that year. Maybe it was just the general excitement of revival time. I know that I didn't sleep through his sermon the way I usually did when Dad was preaching. I think I was also at least a little bit afraid Brother Alfred might ask God to hold it against me if I didn't do my part. Mostly though, I wanted the prize he offered to the one who would bring the most people to "Pack a Pew" the following Sunday night.

Although he had not specified what the prize was to be, I had never won anything. I was fascinated by the possibilities of my winning "while leading as a little child" and believed that his promise "to show us something we had never seen before and would never see again" gave me the tool I needed to accomplish the task. So, I resolved to get as many people as possible to sit in my pew by telling them about Brother Alfred's promise.

Anyway, between the first Sunday and the next I called every kid enrolled in my sixth grade class that year including the Catholics. Each night at the services held during the week, I asked everyone I could contact to sit in my pew on Pack the Pew night. I then inserted invitations, which I had written out by hand on little slips of paper, into the newspapers that I delivered to the customers on my paper route for three straight days. Friday, I made a sandwich board sign and wore it to school inviting one and all to sit in my pew the following Sunday night. I even managed to get a letter published in letters to the editor in the newspaper which listed four good reasons why everyone should

attend the revival and sit in my pew. My fourth reason was Brother Alfred's promise. By Friday night my campaign created such a stir that he commended me personally in front of the whole church.

That night I stayed behind and used the church mimeograph to run off 750 invitations to the revival which I delivered to about 500 houses the next day. Sunday morning, I took the remaining invitations and passed them out to every person I could get to take one as they entered the church. That morning old Deacon Farrell called me "little preacher" which he continued to do until he died some years later. Though I was never to give him cause for the title again, I took it as heady praise that morning. That afternoon I went house to house in the neighborhoods I had not reached with my prior efforts and invited everyone I found at home to the services that night.

I invited each and every person I contacted that week to sit in my pew and come see something they had never seen before and would never see again, underlining that message in my writings and accentuated in my speech. By the time Sunday night arrived, I was approaching hysterical expectancy.

Apparently my persistence and advertising paid off. Sunday morning we reached a *near* record attendance with 233 people in Sunday School and even more in the church service. At the evening services, Pack the Pew night, we had to bring in extra chairs and seat some folks in the foyer. Dad counted over 400 people and later reported that some people had arrived at the church and left rather than try to find a place to sit.

Most of the people asked to sit in my pew. I had not only packed a pew; I had packed a church. Over 320 people stood up to signify they had come to the service in response to my invitations.

My father beamed as if he were looking at Jesus; Mother

cried; Mary Martha, my big sister, favored me with a respectful look. Brother Alfred rhapsodized for about twenty minutes about how if every Baptist in Oklahoma would work as hard as I had, the whole world would be converted within a year. The congregation echoed his words with hearty choruses of "Amen!" "Praise the Lord!" "Yes Lord!" and "That's right, That's right!" I even heard one "Hallelujah!" but that wasn't considered a good Baptist phrase in those days.

Finally, Brother Alfred invited me to the speaker's podium to receive my prize. I still feel as if I floated rather than walked from my pew to the front of the church. I know that I have never felt prouder—or closer to fainting, as I stood there next to him. I was so far from sensibility that I cherished the prize he gave me. It was an autographed copy of his book, *On the Sawdust Trial* (sic) with *Brother Alfred Baylor, the Preaching Peter of our Generation* (sic) At least I had won something.

When he invited me to "say a few words to the folks," I managed somehow to speak despite the pressure in my throat and a foolish grin that distorted my face. I remembered my training and protested that I hadn't really done that much, but then blurted out something about how much I really wanted to see something I had never seen before and would never see again. The audience laughed appreciatively, and Brother Alfred smiled benignly as he reached into his coat pocket.

I've got to hand it to him even after forty years of thinking about it. He was either the coolest cookie that ever faced such circumstances or he genuinely believed he was producing something that would meet my expectations. Instead, he pulled his hand from his pocket and displayed a peanut, announcing, "this is something you have never seen before and will never see again." He ate the peanut as I plodded back to my seat. ☒



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