



News and Current Events :: "Spontaneous Baptisms" at Elevation Church

"Spontaneous Baptisms" at Elevation Church - posted by KingJimmy (), on: 2014/2/21 15:03

A recently featured news item hit the local media. Being that this is my church and my pastor, I'd appreciate your thoughts. Disclaimer: I disagree with this approach.

<http://www.wcnc.com/news/neighborhood-news/How-Elevation-Church-Pastor-Furtick-produce-spontaneous-baptism-246072001.html>

How Elevation Church, Pastor Furtick produce 'spontaneous' baptisms .

CHARLOTTE, N.C. -- You wouldn't know it by the name, but Elevation Church is Southern Baptist. Its Pastor Steven Furtick graduated from a Southern Baptist seminary. Elevation was planted with seed money from Southern Baptists. And Elevation gives money to Southern Baptist missions.

But you won't find the Baptist name on Elevation. Instead its campuses are marked with Elevation's trademarked name and brand -- the orange circle with the 'cup arrow' chevron shape inside. There's not even the traditional cross on the outside of Elevation buildings.

But baptism is the sacred Christian rite symbolizing being raised to a new life in Jesus Christ is clearly vital to Elevation. Online videos of Elevation's mass baptisms play rising music as they show slow motion shots of people obviously moved by a religious experience meaningful to them.

Elevation Church keeps an exact count of its thousands of baptisms, all part of its laser like focus on numbers.

But those numbers have spiked and dipped from year to year according to a confidential internal report obtained by the NBC Charlotte I-Team -- from 289 in 2010 to 2,410 in 2011, from 689 in 2012 to 3,519 for the first eight months of last year.

To get those thousands of baptisms takes a lot of planning.

And Elevation produced a document to show other churches how they could do likewise.

It's titled "Spontaneous Baptisms: A How-To Guide" and the church shared it freely on the Sun Stand Still website.

But parts of the mass baptism guide have drawn sharp criticism -- from other Christians.

Page one shows that the first people instructed to respond to Pastor Steven's call to baptism were not converts suddenly inspired but Elevation volunteers carefully planted in the crowd.

The guide instructs, "Fifteen people will sit in the worship experience and be the first ones to move when Pastor gives the call. Move intentionally through the highest visibility areas and the longest walk."

"They had people in the crowd stand up who never intended to be baptized," said James Duncan, a communications professor at Anderson University and critic of Furtick. "They were shilling for Steven and the intent was these shall stand up and everybody else follows."

Duncan blogged about the baptism guide in a post he titled, "How Steven Furtick engineered a miracle."

"Although Furtick says this is a miracle, it's not a miracle," Duncan said. "It's emotional manipulation."

The spontaneous baptism how-to guide describes its purpose as to "pull off our part in God's miracle." Church

leaders have repeatedly referred to the mass response as a "miracle." But the guide reveals plenty of human staging.

"Most people would not want to be seen as manipulating a group because then you would have questions of authenticity," said Rev. David Key, who teaches Baptist studies at Emory University's Candler School of Theology.

Rev. Key compares the mass baptism service to a show at Disneyworld. "This church has obviously discovered what we in the industry call the "Disneyfication" of religious services."

More stage instructions tell volunteers to go to staging rooms outfitted with towels, pre-printed t-shirts, sports bras, boxers, makeup remover, hair-dryers and flip-flops. Volunteers are instructed to "pick young energetic people" to go on stage first to be baptized and "not necessarily those who are there first."

"Think of the room in terms of a NASCAR pit stop," the guide reads. "Quick in and quick out."

It takes "30 to 45 seconds" to baptize each person as church photographers snap photos.

More volunteers are told, "You are looking for one or two great stories in your group. When you ID those individuals, place a "black wrist band" on them so that the video crew can interview them."

The guide then tells the "media team" to be "mining great stories and pushing them up to the video crew."

James Duncan calls it "marketing for God and because it's for God it's OK."

The baptisms, the photos, the video marketing all serve to build brand loyalty to Elevation.

"Look at how much branding these churches do - the bumper stickers, the T-shirts, the hats, the bracelets - everything," Duncan said.

But the brand loyalty is to Elevation and not necessarily to the Southern Baptist Church. Rev. Key says the Southern Baptist church runs a risk investing in Elevation.

"A church like his does not create any denominational loyalty," Rev. Key said. "Because every member of Elevation Church will not necessarily look for a Southern Baptist church when they move away."

Elevation Pastor Steven Furtick asked me for a face-to-face, off-the-record meeting with me to ask me not to run this report. I spent an hour on the telephone and two more hours in person discussing my reporting, his church and his concerns.

Pastor Steven said I have been unfair and this report in particular would hurt Elevation Church members.

I asked Pastor Steven to consent to an unedited, on-camera interview.

I offered to let Elevation's cameras record the interview. I offered to stream the interview in its entirety online. I offered to air a half-hour unedited interview on television. And WCNC held this report while waiting for Pastor Steven to respond.

Instead Elevation Chief Financial Officer Chunks Corbett e-mailed a statement, saying in part:

"We are confident that those who attend Elevation Church know and understand our mission and vision for reaching people for Jesus Christ. As attendees, they are provided, through weekly teachings, biblical context for everything we do and practice, such as baptism, giving, serving and inviting friends to church."

Re: "Spontaneous Baptisms" at Elevation Church, on: 2014/2/21 15:31

And how many of these people are actually ????

Blaine

Re: "Spontaneous Baptisms" at Elevation Church - posted by Oracio (), on: 2014/2/21 15:55

Brother, I appreciate your willingness to bring this up despite the fact that you are involved in this church.

When I saw this news a few days ago I was tempted to post it here on SI but refrained from doing so partly because I know you attend there, and partly because of some of the SI guidelines on refraining from focusing on slandering ministers or ministries (though I'm sure that is not your motive for posting it, especially considering you attend that church).

One thing I will say is that I believe this is an example of outward appearances that are deceitful. When we see and hear about all those baptisms or people going forward at altar calls, we can easily think it is a genuine powerful work of God if we don't know any better. But my experience has been that most of this kind of hype has proven to be a shallow work of man instead.

I remember when I first went to a crusade as a new believer many years ago. As I saw the hundreds of people who went forward I wept because I believed all those people were actually being born again right before my eyes, passing from death to life and becoming a new creation in Christ. But I was later disappointed when I spoke with a Christian who had been a follow-up worker for those crusades. He shared with me about the heartache he experienced in trying to contact many people who had come forward. He said the vast majority wanted nothing to do with Christ afterward and had only responded to an emotional appeal.

But in God's sovereignty a few do get saved nevertheless. Yet that does not excuse the kind of man-centered pragmatism that is used to get people to come forward.

There are other concerns I have had about this pastor but I will not get into it here.

Re: - posted by Heydave (), on: 2014/2/21 15:55

Well on the evidence of that, if it were my church I would get out of there fast!

It spontaneity is no different from Benny Hinn's meetings.

Re: - posted by Oracio (), on: 2014/2/21 16:09

Also from personal experience in doing personal evangelism I know that much of what passes for "decisions for Christ" is not true conversion. As a newer believer I used to get many people to say the sinner's prayer and I deeply regret it. It wasn't that hard for me to do that. I preached a watered down gospel and promised them eternal life easily and asked them if they wanted to repeat a prayer after me. Many said yes for different reasons, some just wanted to get me off their back and some thought all they had to do to receive eternal life is repeat a prayer. I used to try to follow up with them and was disappointed in seeing how disinterested they were about following Jesus. I was guilty of leading many into false experiences.

Re: , on: 2014/2/21 16:19

I meant to ask and how many of these people are actually believers? But Greg has already already posed the question.

Blaine

Re: - posted by KingJimmy (), on: 2014/2/21 18:34

I ask because I don't like this. Not so much the planting of people and creating an atmosphere of worship. But more so that at this was called "spontaneous." Such seems something of a lie. To some people it definitely was. And no doubt, for many it was sincerely such. I personally know many people who have had their lives profoundly changed and passed from death to life from this ministry. To me this is the Pentecostal equivalent of a heavy handed preacher who "helps" people at the altar.

But it definitely brings in questions of integrity of everything.

Re: - posted by wayneman (), on: 2014/2/22 9:51

Planting volunteers in the congregation to come forward first for the altar call, to "get the ball rolling," is not new. It is a standard mass evangelism procedure. But volunteers are usually told that it is for security reasons, not crowd manipulation purposes. If you go to the Harvest Crusade in Anaheim, or any other mass evangelism service, you will notice that a few burly men are always the first at the altar, ostensibly to protect the preachers and musicians from any crazies who might jump onstage. But whatever the real intentions are, the crowd manipulation tactic is still in effect.

Just like industrialists have found that the assembly line is the most efficient way to manufacture goods, the Industrial Church has found that assembly-line methods are the most efficient way of manufacturing converts. Even though only a small percentage of these converts will stick around, they are manufactured in such great numbers and at such little expense that this method of producing converts is the most cost-efficient way to church growth.

And that is how the strait and narrow way that leads to life got to be paved under by the Salvation Superhighway.

Re: - posted by wayneman (), on: 2014/2/22 10:05

Blaine,

How many are actually believers? According to a study by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, only one percent of mass evangelism converts are still involved with church and "showing signs of regeneration" after one year. To rectify this, the Association launched a program that placed crusade converts in solid Bible churches with new believer classes and personal mentors. A later study found that this program had no effect at all: still just one percent.

So why do preachers keep using methods known to be ineffective? Because they are in the entertainment business, that is why. An evangelistic crusade that does not end with a huge crowd at the altar is a poor performance. So people must be compelled to the altar by whatever means necessary.

For example, the preacher says, "With heads bowed and eyes closed, anyone who wants to accept Christ as your Savior tonight, raise your hand."

"Oh, that is easy enough!" says the poor sinner, "This is just between me and God." And raises his hand.

But then the preacher says, "Gotcha! Now everyone who just raised their hands, step out into the aisle and come forward to the altar!"

Another method is auto-suggestion: "Now turn to the person next to you and say..." "Now say it with me..."

Another is crowding. Sometimes the ushers will cram the audience together at the front of the arena, even if entire sections of seats are left empty. After a few hours of claustrophobia, people will be more inclined to come down the aisle just to move their legs.

In his more sober moments, the evangelist cannot really believe that he is producing Christians this way. No, he is an entertainer, and the crescendo of his performance is the altar call.

Re: - posted by KingJimmy (), on: 2014/2/22 10:25

I remember preaching a sermon once, where I specifically said we were not going to have an altar call as I finished my sermon. But people came up front anyway.

Re: - posted by KingJimmy (), on: 2014/2/22 10:29

It is interesting that you guys say this sort of trick has been a feature at mass evangelism crusades for a long time now. I was unaware that this is an old trick. I presume Billy Graham and others? I wonder if Wesley, Whitefield, Moody, or others admit to ever using this sort of pragmatic device to induce responses?

Re: - posted by wayneman (), on: 2014/2/22 10:55

It was Charles Finney who first devised "new measures" such as designating the front pew as the "Mourner's Bench", or asking repentant sinners to stand, or come forward, or remain after the service. These measures were "pragmatic," certainly, but at least they weren't tricky. Some critics said that these tactics were manipulative but - and this is what set Finney apart from our mass evangelists - he and his co-workers would individually counsel every person who remained after the meeting, and help them pray through to salvation.

Booth and Moody did the same thing. They had altar calls, but volunteers would deal with every penitent individually. They did not herd them to the altar, have them chant the Sinner's Prayer, pronounce them "saved" and send them home.

Billy Sunday is really the father of mass evangelism. He would have the "converts" file down the center aisle and shake hands with him. So one became a Christian by shaking hands with Billy Sunday. Have you heard the term "Sunday Saint?" I used to think that referred to people who were "saints" on Sunday but lived like hell the rest of the week. But no, it was a pejorative term for Sunday's converts, who were notoriously unconverted-looking!

I do not know what methods Wesley and Whitefield used, if any.

Re: , on: 2014/2/22 11:18

Another word for "trick" is deception. And deception is LYING.

Boy, I guess the pressure is pretty great these days to produce numbers and keep the money coming in.

Being "in water" (baptism) has never equated to true salvation. One must be "in Christ" and that will always bring true salvation.

He that is still "In Christ" at the end, will be saved.

I can see why this makes you sick, Jimmy. Congregations should confront these types of things and not go along with them. Otherwise, leadership will think they can get away with anything. The next thing he tries will be even more insane. We hurt each other by not speaking the truth and consequently we are hurting the whole body. Your Pastor should confess the truth about what he was doing and apologize or else he should leave and if he doesn't, I would.

It is up to the members to hold fast to the Head, not to blindly follow another "member".

Please let us know how the Body handles this. The leadership has proven incapable of handling it.

Re: - posted by KingJimmy (), on: 2014/2/23 11:35

For those of you who care and have been following the controversy, especially via Facebook and blogs, In today's sermon today at Elevation Church, Steven Furtick said the 15 volunteers in the news coverage aren't "plants," but are people who already expressed interest in being baptized beforehand, and who were selected to show people who responded well here to go in response to the call for baptism. They were people looking to be baptized too. He said he's too afraid of God to resort to manipulative tricks. And in response to the media coverage, he has called for another mass baptism service tonight. While pastor Furtick didn't address all of my concerns regarding this controversy, he did satisfy enough of them. I am thankful for the dialogue that has taken place, in and outside the church. I look forward to continuing to be a part of the church.

- posted by MrBillPro (), on: 2014/2/23 13:27

Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints. For certain persons have crept in unnoticed, those who were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation, ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.â€Jude 1:3-4

Re: , on: 2014/2/23 17:01

Something very troubling here. It is as if the ordinance of baptism has been cheapened.

Blaine

Re: - posted by Heydave (), on: 2014/2/24 9:20

I'm a bit reluctant to post this, seeing that it is your (Jimmy's) local church, but I had a good look at the website and I suppose I'm a bit surprised you attend this place Jimmy.

This whole thing with the baptisms does not seem out of place with the way everything else is presented on the website. It's just a natural progression of the 'spirit' of that church. I'm not judging the people (I don't know them) or even the teaching, which may be OK, but just what is presented on the website as the 'shop window' for this church.

It looked a lot like a new brand of Hillsong churches with a youth pop culture, particularly the worship being loud pop concert style. Also it centres around the personality on one man very much. I did not see many older folk in the congregation. I don't know that they would really fit.

Is this really what the church is meant to be? Has the Christian faith and church now become a commodity and brand to market with a franchise growth opportunity for others to buy into the brand across other cities?

Maybe I'm just getting too cynical in my old age, but I've been around a long time and experienced all types of churches and have never liked these pop culture style churches (even when I was young rebel). There is much too much soulless manipulation in the atmosphere of such places.

Sorry Jimmy, I don't intend to offend you, but it's just how I see it.

Re: - posted by KingJimmy (), on: 2014/2/24 10:19

Every now and then, I'm a little surprised I go there too. It's not what I would really look for in a church. Then again, I've never really been part of a church over the years that met the "what I'm looking for in a church" criteria.

I primarily go because when my wife got married, that is where she's been going before I was even in the picture. Since my wife lived on the other side of town (35+ miles away) before we got married, I had to leave my other church, as it is about a 40+ minute commute from where I live now. The church is literally just down the street from us, and we could literally walk to it if we wanted to do so on any given Sunday.

However, since becoming a part of this church, I've discovered there are a lot of truly good Christian people that go, who sincerely love the Lord, and I feel a witness in my spirit with them. I've known a few people to get saved at this church, and some of its growth is definitely in bringing new converts to the Lord. There are a few things that happen at this church that I don't particularly care for, and think some of the practices are definitely carnal, instead of relying on the spirit of God. This "spontaneous baptism" practice definitely alarmed me at first.

There are actually quite a few older individuals in this congregation. It definitely seeks after a younger crowd, many being 20 and 30 somethings. And it gets a lot of those. But, there is a pretty good mix of people at the church. My in-laws, who are in their 60's, attend this church, primarily due to the fact that this church renewed my wife's walk with the Lord prior to my meeting her. A few Sunday's ago I saw a woman who looked to be in her 80's respond to the invitation to receive Christ.

My philosophy of picking a church has always had less to do with "where I would want to go" and more-so "where I find myself planted" through my interpersonal relationships and the proximity of the church to where I live.