

Texas' First Evangelist

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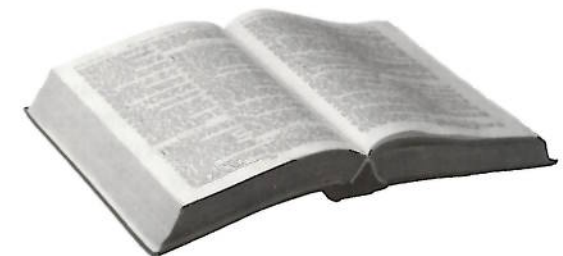


When J. H. Stribling, pastor of First Baptist Church, Tyler, invited a successful lawyer from Jefferson to lead a revival that had recently begun in his church, little could Stribling or anyone else have known the impact that this event would have upon Texas Baptists. Although he was neither ordained nor licensed, W. E. Penn reluctantly accepted Stribling's invitation. The revival lasted for five weeks and forever changed revivalism in the state.

Penn abandoned his law practice in 1875 to become a full-time lay evangelist—a position unheard of at the time. Many questioned whether or not a layman should be leading revivals. The questions soon ceased, however, as people began to hear Penn's sermons for themselves. Penn's time as a lay evangelist was short, for in 1880 he was ordained.

Penn's revivals impacted not only the sponsoring congregation but entire communities as well. In 1876 a Penn-led revival lasted 81 days. When the final service ended almost 370 people had been converted. At a revival in Georgetown in 1879, over 450 individuals professed faith in Christ. And a meeting held in Salado resulted in 100 conversions in a single day.

Penn was the first full-time evangelist among Southern and Texas Baptists. His impact did not stop with his preaching however; he was also the first evangelist to travel with an accompanying singer. Penn enjoyed singing himself and had a strong bass voice that could be heard by thousands without any apparent effort on his part. In fact, Penn frequently introduced his sermons with a song. In addition, Penn authored numerous hymns.



By the time of his death in 1895, this one-time lawyer had left an indelible mark on Southern and Texas Baptist revivalism.

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