

Lubbock's Historical Religious Features

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The history, demographics and religious heritage of Lubbock, Texas at first, appears to be an ordinary beginning: A West Texas town on the frontier. But a more careful look reveals a city with a particular DNA designed for the destiny God is currently revealing.

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The first church meeting held in the city was in 1890 in the Singer's Store. This meeting, presided by a Church of Christ preacher, did not however, develop into an established church at that point. The earliest congregations established in Lubbock were Baptist and Methodist, both in 1892. A Quaker congregation, originally established in nearby Estacado, Texas, relocated in Lubbock and held meetings from 1890 to 1896. In that last year, it dissolved and members assimilated into other congregations. In 1901, the Christian Church was established; 1903 saw the founding of the Church of Christ and the Presbyterian Church. The Cumberland Presbyterian church was organized in 1908, the Church of the Nazarene in 1909.

Harmony among the churches was evident in those early years. In 1896, the courthouse was the common meeting place for the Baptist, Church of Christ, Quakers, and Methodist. These four congregations would rotate, taking turns leading the service. Many people attended every Sunday regardless of who was leading. When the Baptists built

Lubbock's first church, members of other congregations made contributions. This was the norm as various congregations began to build. In 1905 the Baptists and Methodists shared a union choir. Up until the first world war, all of the existing churches, with the exception of the Church of Christ, cooperated in a union Sunday school steered by superintendents and pastors from each church represented. Lubbock pastors exchanged pulpits regularly and sometime before 1914, an informal pastors association was formed.

The churches in those early years are credited with positively impacting the moral fiber of this new western town. These churches were the center of social life – there was no other option. The leaders of the town looked to the churches to assist in bringing positive social order. Businessmen and ranchers agreed with the moral standards of Christianity because drunken, carousing farm hands and business employees were not as productive as moral workers. Town leaders and church leaders combined to prohibit entertainment such as sports or theater, to take place on Sunday; prohibition was intact in Lubbock from the start.

Early statements by civic and Christian leaders reveal the nature of this settlement. The local editor of the paper said, "Let's keep Lubbock clean of 'dives' and 'hell holes' and we will have an ideal town."¹ A leader from the Baptist church said, "We ought to make the 'Hub of the Plains' a religious hub. Religious foundations insure the peace, security and prosperity of any community."² John C. Welch, pastor of the Christian Church said, "May

¹Merton L. Dillon, "Religion in Lubbock," *The History of Lubbock*, ed. Lawrence L. Graves (Lubbock, TX: West Texas Museum Association, 1962) 458.

²Ibid.

we all help to build Lubbock morally while she is young that when she is old she may not depart from it.”³ Businessmen and church leaders wanted a moral society, but for different or mixed reasons: the businessmen and civic leaders saw the benefit of a stable society; the church leaders saw morality as the Christian’s responsibility before God.

In the 1920's the churches began to lose their control over society. The pastor of the Christian church stated that the young people felt that the church was not connected with real-life issues. Current events facing the church then were the war, the settling into the community of non-church-going citizens, prosperity, the social gospel, and the evolution-verses-creation debate. One effort made to respond to the accusation that the church was not concerned with real life issues came through the Baptist Church, who organized a community chest. This was the first attempt at organized social services by any church in Lubbock. Another method of increasing the church's appeal to the community was the establishment of social and athletic activities. Sermons exhibited more popular public speaking techniques such as catchy titles and humorous illustrations.

Pastors, with the exception of the Church of Christ and Church of the Nazarene, who remained focused upon personal salvation and holiness, tended to let their sermon topics drift over into the current issues in an effort to be more relevant to the people. Pastors were criticized in the newspaper for preaching about social issues to which they were only moderately qualified. They were admonished to stick to spiritual and personal salvation issues as they were called to do. Interestingly, many businessmen preferred the fundamental

³Ibid. 459.

preaching, not solely because of its Biblical value but because when the preacher “meddled” in the social affairs, it made the hearers feel guilty and uncomfortable.

The debate between issues such as fundamentalism and evolution played itself out in Lubbock. The school superintendent, in a message to First Christian Church, stated that the schools and colleges were approaching dangerous areas with their teachings of evolution. This concern was heightened with the establishment of Texas Technological College in Lubbock. This institution attracted an educated element of society that did not share the fundamental values of the founding fathers of the city.

During this period, unity among the congregations of the city was still expressed. In 1927, a great four-week revival took place involving leaders and members from First Baptist, First Methodist, First Presbyterian, Church of the Nazarene and Cumberland Presbyterian. The Church of Christ held its own gospel meeting. This tent meet was a success, but it did not reach the numbers the leaders had hoped for. The newspaper speculated that Lubbock had gone too far down the road, dancing with the rising economy with profits to be made, to get their minds off of this world and respond in a personal way to eternal truth. In 1929, similar union services were held with two thousand to twenty-five hundred attending. During one of the evening meetings of this union revival, a foretaste of the next decade was displayed. The president of Texas Technological College spoke, as did the guest revivalist. Whether the group that night foresaw the conflict is not clear, but the denouncement of sin by the evangelist and the liberal thinking of the college were on a collision course.

In the early 1930's the leadership of First Baptist church declared that Texas Technological College was the single most dreaded enemy of pure Christianity. This fostered an adversarial relationship between the church and college – a fight that was played out on the pages of the newspaper. Accusations flew that the leaders of the churches were bigots and that infidels staffed the college. In the summer of 1932, a faculty member who did most to fuel the controversy was dismissed and the community sensed, for the time being, that the churches had won a moral victory in this issue.

Also in the 1930's, the effects of The Depression brought about an opportunity for the church to respond to the needs of the community. There was an effort sponsored by the Ministerial Association on behalf of the poor needing relief. A citywide fast day yielded \$610 in relief funds. But, another issue of the 1930's distracted the church's attention from the needs of the poor - a fact that drew criticism from the community. Namely, the fight for prohibition by the churches seemed petty to some in the community in the light of economic problems of the decade. However, by vote prohibition in Lubbock was upheld. When an attempted repeal by the state succeeded, Lubbock upheld prohibition, by vote with a local option.

The 1930's also saw a new feature within the church of Lubbock. Many smaller churches were being established. These congregations, included Independent, Pentecostal, Apostolic, Assembly of God, and Fundamentalist. The appeal toward these churches was apparently due to more than just a different kind of expression of worship and faith. It possibly had to do with the business and prosperity perspective of the mainline, established

churches.

One notable example of how business-mindedness influenced the church was when a pastor proposed economic benefit as a motivation for supporting missionaries. He argued that heathens were not consumers of American-made products until missionaries converted heathens into, among other things, consumers of western goods. It was proposed that each missionary created US trade of nearly fifty thousand dollars in his or her lifetime work. Therefore, supporting missionaries was good for the economy and wise for American business owners.⁴ This may have impressed the businessmen in the established congregations but this type of reasoning was irrelevant and irreverent to many church members. Higher income families tended to gravitate toward large downtown churches; lower income families felt more at home in the smaller new churches. Of course there were exceptions to this rule. The older, established congregations had become the home of business and professional people. By and large, the non-middle-to-upper-class, the less educated, and certainly the non-white did not feel comfortable in these congregations. That these conditions persisted is demonstrated years later by the fact that in a Billy Graham revival in Lubbock in 1953, African Americans had to sit in a special section⁵; a segregation that did not occur in the 1959 revival of Howard Butt.

The union revivals died out in the thirties; however, individual congregations tended to continue to have annual revival services. Interest in Wednesday night prayer meetings

⁴Dillon, *Religion in Lubbock*, 493.

⁵Ibid. 495.

diminished during this period. One pastor noted that the condition of these prayer meetings was the thermometer of the church – perhaps a prophetic statement about the church in Lubbock. The passion for spiritual vitality seemed to be waning in the church.

Issues which were prevalent after World War II included increased vigilance in keeping Sunday free of business-as-usual work, fighting a growing bootlegging underground; establishing Bible chairs on Tech's campus, where many college functions were opened with prayer, and churches announcing and completing major building projects. Church offices in downtown Lubbock took on business-like decor with conference rooms, business managers and large staffs.

In the 1950's, church growth was not keeping up with population growth. A 1957 poll shows that Lubbock's church membership was below the national average.⁶ Even though the city average was down, in that period of time some of the leading churches of their denomination were located in Lubbock. Broadway Church of Christ was the largest in the world among its brotherhood. First Methodist's membership was in the top ten of its denomination. First Baptist and First Christian were booming. There was a consensus during this cold war period, that God-fearing democracy was the only answer to godless communism. Christianity and patriotism were mixed together in Lubbock and difficult to distinguish.

The message of the church in the 1950's was that salvation in Jesus defeats sin and its

⁶Dillon, *Religion in Lubbock*, 504.

destruction. People were concerned about applying Christianity to their everyday lives, eroding institutions such as marriage and family, emerging racial tensions and threats of nuclear war. The social Gospel made its way into sermons upon occasion, and ecumenical themes were also emerging.

The sixties brought a time of national turmoil, questioning and protesting the established values of the traditional church. Pockets of protest in Lubbock tended to be confined to Texas Tech and the area surrounding the campus. Also, this was a period when groups such as the Unitarian Universalist Church became vocal in expressing their liberal point of view toward the established traditional church. In comparison with the rest of the country, however, Lubbock churches did not experience the eroding of the conservative, traditional values to the same extent. Churches experienced, moderate growth, expansion of programs, and more importantly, new church plants in new neighborhoods of the city.

In the 1970's and 1980's, conservative evangelical and charismatic churches tended to grow significantly in Lubbock. There was a charismatic revival in the seventies that resulted in establishing Trinity Church as a prominent place in the spiritual skyline. That revival also created animosity between many congregations and Trinity due to the fact that so many congregations had members, even leaders, moved their membership to Trinity during and following that revival. Mainline churches that hung on to moderate or liberal positions declined slightly. Issues facing the church were humanism, prayer in schools, and abortion. Growing churches were those that held to the moral and biblically conservative roots upon which the city and its congregations were founded.

It was upon this spiritual mosaic backdrop of this city of churches that city-focused prayer began to emerge in the eighties. Significantly sized Baptist churches were all over the city. Churches of Christ abounded. Most denominations had multiple congregations across the city. But, along with the plethora of churches a territorial attitude had grown among congregations. Attitudes ranged from cordial suspicion to outright mistrust across congregational lines. If not as an enemy, other congregations were at best viewed as “the competition.”⁷ Intercessors who were praying for the city at that time describe the prayer efforts as plowing through hard, hard soil. A pastor who had a vision for getting pastors together said it was like working under a “closed heaven” – encouraging pastors to get together produced precious little fruit. Congregations were healthy – but independently so. Pastors were competent and doing what they did best – shepherding their local congregation. It was apparently assumed that if every congregation did their independent part, the needs of the city would be met. Some congregations had a vision to reach the city, but their vision was for their congregation to reach the city. This is not a particular indictment against the churches of Lubbock in the eighties – this was the state of the church all over the world. But a change was on the horizon.

The decade of the nineties has seen a significant shift in the atmosphere. Many churches continued to see growth in church structures with several completing or planning major building expansions or relocating, positioning themselves near the population centers. Some congregations still operate independently, and those who do so tend to be so immersed

⁷David Eppler, “Prayer Transforms a City.” *Ministries Today*, March/April 2000, 24.

in their own vision and activities, they hardly have time to look out and see what is happening to the complexion of the church in the city. Many congregations are beginning to notice what God is doing on the horizon and are beginning a paradigm shift in their theology and practice.

Several factors in the early-to-middle nineties have played significant roles in the change of climate: Marches for Jesus, an initial prayer summit, the Promise Keepers Clergy Conference in Atlanta, a visit by John Dawson, a visit by Terry Teykl, a visit by Henry Blackaby, somehow all gave some pastors of Lubbock comfortable ways to interact with each other. Trust and friendship began to develop among pastors. Pray Lubbock is merely the current face on this movement of God in bringing the body of Christ together. Although far from complete, the momentum seems to be moving toward an organic bond. There is a unity forming expressly because pastors and leaders are recognizing that they serve the same Lord; the unity is not the result of an organizational alignment; it is out of a desire to see Jesus' prayer for unity of his followers fulfilled.

Conclusions and Observations

When John Dawson visited Lubbock and spoke at a pastors meeting, he made reference to circumstances concerning the birth of the City of Lubbock. There were actually two cities, Lubbock and Monterey, growing side by side. The leaders of each town came together and made a decision to combine efforts. The end result was that the town of Monterey submitted to the town of Lubbock. This act of submission may be indicative of an inherent nature of the people here, a willingness to make sacrifices for the good of the whole. This

attitude among the city planners is kin to the attitude among the early congregations in their cooperation with one another, sharing of worship locations, financing one another's building projects, forming union Sunday schools, conduction joint revival services and community outreach projects. It seems clear that this city has within its DNA a propensity to work together. Prayer effort would be well spent for a restoration of that cooperative attitude, seeking to be united even more as the body of Christ, building on the heritage of Lubbock's historical Christian leaders.

For further reading:

Chalfant, H. Paul. "Religion in Lubbock," In *Lubbock from Town to City*, edited by Lawrence L. Graves, 298-333. Lubbock, Texas: West Texas Museum Association, 1986.

Merton, L. Dillon. "Religion in Lubbock," in *History of Lubbock*, edited by Lawrence L. Graves, 449-516. Lubbock, TX: West Texas Museum Association, 1962.