

Opinion: The Penny Offering – A tribute to James Semple

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A transplanted Texan, he served 25 years as pastor of First Baptist in Paris and was selected by the citizens of Lamar County as one of the 50 most influential citizens of the 20th century. Most remember him as the influential State Missions director and the impact he made on Texas churches for evangelism.

In his heart he was an evangelist and could have spent his life in that vocation. Scores of churches were blessed by his ministry as an interim pastor or a revival preacher,

That's how I met him in the early 1970s when I was pastor of my first full-time church, Crestview Baptist in Austin. A friend recommended Jim, and he gladly accepted our church's invitation to lead our spring revival.

I was not disappointed. In fact, it proved to be in attendance, spirit, decisions and every way you measure revival services, one of the very best in my 30 years as pastor.

But when I read of Jim Semple's death at age 80, my first thought was not of these accolades, but of the Penny Offering.

During the revival week, Dr. Semple had asked permission to take a Penny Offering on the last Sunday night of the revival, without revealing the purpose until after the offering. Our leaders gladly agreed, assuming the offering-gift was for some special mission cause close to the evangelist's heart.

Our evangelist explained to the congregation that after the last evening service, this Penny Offering would be received, asking each to bring an offering equal to their age—one penny for each year. After the offering, our guest speaker would then explain the purpose of the offering and would use it only with the church's consent.

I thought to myself, although our church had been packed with over 300 folks every service, still a penny for each year of your age could not amount to much.

The excitement of this special week of revival was equaled that Sunday evening by the curiosity of everyone over that final Penny Offering. At the conclusion of the final service, the Penny Offering was taken. It amounted to more than \$70—a handsome sum 40 years ago.

The evangelist then explained: “The person most often overlooked in a church, though one of the most essential members, is one who works behind the scenes—teaching, visiting, praying, comforting, and supporting the pastor. Though appreciated, she is seldom recognized for her service. Audra (Jim said to my wife), come up here and receive this offering with only one stipulation—you must promise to spend it on yourself for something you want, but cannot afford.”

The next Sunday, my wife wore a beautiful new coat, which she had desired and needed for a long time, but one we could not afford.

So, as I thank God for the life and ministry of James Semple, I not only think of the pastor, the evangelist, the director of mission work in Texas—but I also, even now, feel a stirring in my heart and tears in my eyes for that giant of a man whose Penny Offering made an impact on a church and a pastor and his wife that never will be forgotten.

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