

# Willis J. Ray

## A Man of Faith

It's hard for old-line Arizona Southern Baptists not to get a little misty and wistful about Willis J. Ray. He is to them something akin to what George Washington is to Americans at large...the father of his state convention, as it were.

**“I’ve been referred to as a man of faith – I don’t think I am.”**

If that appellation doesn't have much of a ring to it, well, Dr. Ray wasn't in it for the accolades, anyway. Whatever reputation he derived arose of its own free will and volition; Dr. Ray was...busy.

He helped organize everything in the beginning, was an early resident of the executive director's chair (though, being Dr. Ray, the sitting was kept to a minimum), gave dozens of newborn churches his pennies and prayers and the necessary nudges (gentle and otherwise). He wrestled Grand Canyon College into existence, and bestowed the initial administrative blessings on what became the Arizona Baptist Children's Services.

More than any of that, though, he set a tone.

Simple, straightforward, steady, he preached the gospel of evangelism. The business of Baptists was churches, he believed, and the business of churches was souls. He gave his life to those priorities, and he seared them into the heart of Arizona Southern Baptists.

**“What I did I didn't do to make history. I did it because it was something to be done.”**

Along the way, he left his highly individual mark on dozens of churches throughout the West, and was a major factor in developing Baptist work in Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nebraska, North and South Dakota, Utah, and Wyoming.

Not bad for a Kansas farm boy.

Born in Kansas in 1896, Ray was a farmboy who married his childhood sweetheart, Ida, and set out to make a life off the land. Farming didn't take, though; three straight crop failures convinced him God had other fields for him to plow. Six years and as many jobs later, he was closer to prosperity but still far from content; a restlessness plagued him. For 13 years, he'd resisted an inner conviction that the Lord was calling him to preach. One Sunday, just shy of his 31<sup>st</sup> birthday, Willis J. Ray heeded the call.

**“My philosophy has always been that I'd take care of the Lord's business if He'd take care of mine.”**

For 17 years, he roamed Depression-era Texas, pastoring city and country churches, big and small, honing his skills as a missionary leader in the Big Springs and San Antonio regions. He bought a \$35 house, drove a \$100 car, raised a family on \$40 a month. He learned to trust God for groceries and gas money and church finances, grew wise in

the ways of God and man, became known as a straight-shooter who brooked no nonsense. Folks said you could depend on him.

Friends wrote back from points farther west, aglow with tales of Baptist work flickering to life in the deserts and oases of Arizona. Would he come and see? No, he wrote. Plenty to do in Texas.

**“I didn’t want to come to Arizona but I figured if other people could live out here, I could too...”**

The letters kept coming. The former farmer’s eyes slowly shifted to a new field. And, in the blazing summer of 1944, the Rays loaded up and lit out. Three car breakdowns later, they stepped out in to the 117-degree July-in Phoenix heat.

“I think we’ve come to the wrong place,” Ida said.

The Baptist General Convention of Arizona then consisted of 25 mostly-tiny churches. When the Rays left, 12 years later, there were more than 200 congregations -- and seven times as many souls sitting in the Southern Baptist pews. Nine other states teemed with Arizona-sponsored churches. No one knows how many lives have been touched, indirectly, around the world.

Results like that tend to mark a leader as a “man of vision.” With Dr. Ray, the vision was remarkably 20-20.

“I never pastored a church but that I asked that the church give 20 percent to missions and pay that check before we issued any other,” Dr. Ray said. “Christ died for the world, not just the local field. Every place I’ve been, I’ve asked the church or the convention to see the whole world.”

**“I just had faith that what needed to be done, God could do it.”**

The Lord crowned his work with success, and success bred a legend. People marveled at the generosity of a man who sold his car and his home to keep a college afloat ...

...the down-to-earth style that wrote out thousand-dollar loans to new, hand-to-mouth churches on a piece of scrap paper...

...the canny acumen that lured gifted men to obscure service and primed timely windfalls to quench the debts of desert work...

...at the prayers of a righteous man whose faith rejoiced in the godsend long before God sent them.

He retired in 1962. Over the next 30 years, as he lived and worked and prayed on and on, memories softened and took on a rosy hue, and the legends settled into their comfortable shoes. Dr. Ray became, for newer generations, a wizened old man in a Baptist Beacon picture, or the name on a building or a plaque.

When he died, in December 1992, hundreds gathered at his home church in Payson and near the university campus in Phoenix, pastors and denominational leaders from all over the West

pausing to honor the failed farmer who'd sown the unplowed soil of souls for most of a century.

"He was," says one of many heirs to the mantle, "a mystic – a man who just believed something was going to happen without having any idea of how."

Maybe so. From the vantage point of 50 years, most of us find men like Dr. Ray (and there were a lot of men like him) both inspiring and...quaint. The people they ministered to...the obstacles they grappled with...the sums they fretted over, are yellowed pages in deepening files, lost to fickle memory and inexorable history.

But Dr. Ray's hard-earned legacy lives. The simple legacy of a simple man, not unlike other men. The quiet example of a Christian who believed in his God.

**"I'm so limited in my personality. I'm not handsome like lots of men. I'm not an orator. I've had to let the Lord use what I am. So I just want to be remembered as a humble servant of the Lord."**