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## John Henry Clay: God's Faithful Preacher

By Don Williams

What kind of man makes a great preacher? If you were looking for a man who would baptize over 10,000 people in 52 years of ministry, who would you select? Would he be white, large of stature, robust, charismatic in nature, with a booming voice? If so, you would have missed John Henry Clay—and yet, through this humble man, God has brought one of the greatest harvests in the history of the church.

Clay did not start out to preach. Born June 24, 1920, in Lafayette, Louisiana, he became a professional entertainer at age eight. He was hired to travel with a show as tap dancer, singer, and comedian. Moving to Port Arthur, Texas, he continued to perform in night clubs and on the minstrel circuit.

At age 16, he and a friend were going from one church service to another, seeing which girls were present! They went to a tent meeting of the Tituson Avenue Church of Christ, where the great Marshall Keeble was preaching. After a few minutes, the friend said, "Let's go. There are no girls here." But John Henry said, "I like the sound of this preacher. I think I will stay." Before the end of the week he was baptized into Christ. (By the way, there *was* a girl there. Her name was Sadie Lee Fontenot. She was the adopted daughter of the local evangelist, Luke Miller. Three years later, she became Mrs. John Henry Clay.)

Luke Miller soon became the young man's mentor. He gave Clay a Bible, religious books, and sermon outlines to study. On Clay's seventeenth birthday, in 1937, less than three months after his conversion, he preached his first sermon. He was the youngest of nine preachers Miller was instructing at the time, and every Thursday night was set aside for preacher training. He would travel with Miller to lead singing and make talks.

In 1938 and '39, John Henry worked part time with the church in Hillerster, Texas, before moving to Hobbs, New Mexico, for his first full-time work. He became engaged to Sadie before leaving Texas, and after three months in Hobbs, he sent for her. They were married on the day she arrived. C. B. Millerton, preacher of the white church which was supporting him, performed the ceremony. Support? He received \$7 per week as salary.

Clay worked with three churches in Texas—Jacksonville, Natches, and Palestine—before moving to Decatur, Alabama. Alabama became the most fruitful state of all his labors. He attended a preacher training course in each of five consecutive years at the Nashville Christian Institute, where instructors from David Lipscomb



Don Williams presents Pepperdine's Distinguished Christian Service Award to John Henry Clay.

College would come to train black preachers.

He preached in Valdosta, Georgia, and Muskogee, Oklahoma, before returning to Lanette, Alabama, to work with a church he had earlier established. Through gospel meetings where he preached, there were 79 baptisms in Muskogee and 65 baptisms in Lanette.

Clay moved to Oakland, California in 1950 to work with the 29th Street Church. In one year, over 100 people were baptized, the building was outgrown, and new property was purchased.

In 1955, Pasadena, California, became the home of John Henry and Sadie Clay, as they began working with the Lincoln Avenue Church. Four years later, they established the North Pasadena congregation, and in 1967, they began the Altadena church. The first year of the Altadena church's existence brought 116 baptisms!

John Henry has helped to establish 36 congregations in 11 states. Three of these in Alabama—Enterprise, Brundidge, and Clanton—together had 524 baptisms in gospel meetings held by him.

He preached through days of extreme prejudice. In the South, they would often put a rope down the center of the tent to divide whites from blacks. In Lanette, Alabama, the crowd was

so great one night that a white person sat next to a black person. The next night, a letter written in red (with the appearance of blood) was found on the pulpit. In the letter, the Ku Klux Klan threatened Clay for mixing the races. Then, the next evening, they came with a cross, which they planned to burn along with the tent. They were dissuaded at the last moment by a church member.

In a meeting at Gunterville, Alabama, whites wanting to hear the gospel actually outnumbered the blacks. One evening when they came for service, the chalkboard had a message from the Klan: "We will not tolerate the mixing of races. Leave town." Police had to be at each service after Clay's life was threatened.

In many meetings, when white people would respond to the gospel it was necessary to call a white preacher to baptize the people. Often white members of the church would refer to John Henry as "boy" or "Clay," but not "brother." Interestingly, his preaching in a meeting for an all-white church in Summerville, Pennsylvania, in 1948 was revolutionary.

His extreme fear of snakes has never let him forget the mill pond in Hamilton Crossroads,

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