

The Conversion of Evariste Hebert

By Evariste Hebert

[Editor's Note: This is of historical interest relating to the Churches of Christ in southern Louisiana. Lea and I worked with congregations in Lake Charles, Maplewood, and New Iberia from 1946 through 1959. During that time, more than 45 years ago, I was given a pamphlet bearing the above title published by J. W. West of Lynchburg, Virginia. I want to share an abridgment of it with you. Being privileged to meet and hear Evariste Hebert (pronounced "a-bear" with accent on "a") one time, I was able to recognize him as a person of strong mind and commanding presence. In his own style you will see a reflection of times in the early 1900s -Cecil Hook.]

The French Acadians of Louisiana were deported from Nova Scotia by the English Government under the reign of King George II. They are the people immortalized by Longfellow's "*Evangeline*," and are so clearly depicted in "*The True Story of French Acadians*," by Dudley J. LeBlanc, of Lafayette, La. These poor unfortunates were dumped upon the shores of Louisiana and left to perish in the midst of their poverty among the Attakapas Indians, surrounded by swamps and bayous and mosquito infested lowlands. How sad was the fate of these poor harmless people! A large number died and others suffered untold hardships. Mr. LeBlanc, in the book mentioned, states that there are now in Louisiana almost 500,000 of these people, and after 180 years of separation from the people of their own faith and language, they are still a Catholic and French-speaking people.

So far as we are able to discover, I was the first one of them to break loose from the Roman Catholic faith and to be converted to the teaching of the New Testament and become a member of the Church of Christ. I was also the first of them to preach the pure gospel of Christ to them. I am the founder of what is called the French Mission of the Church of Christ in our state.

I was born February 20, 1886, at Mouton's Cove, Vermilion Parish, La. My parents, Evariste Hebert and Felicie Lacour, were very poor. In my early youth I attended school in Mouton's Cove under Professor Fuquer and Miss Mattie Holmes. After three years in school, my parents moved to Crowley, La., where I finished my high school work in the Crowley Convent. After that, I had to choose my life's work and I decided above everything else, I would become a Catholic priest. To that end I entered St. Joseph's College, near Covington, La. This Seminary is conducted by an order of priests known as the Benedictine Fathers. After being in the Seminary three years, I was forced to return home to help care for my mother and younger brothers.

I was employed in a store to help support the family, but I was not happy nor satisfied, for it prevented my doing the work I loved for the church. One day I asked my priest and then the Bishop for permission to become a lay missionary. The authority was given and I at once began to teach nightly and on Sundays. After six years of such work, I was requested by a priest by the name of Fontaine, of Mermentau, to hold a ten day mission for him at Henry Cove school house seven miles south of Mermentau. I accepted the

commission gladly. At the very first service I announced that I would speak the following night on the Confession and Communion. I stated these were the most essential doctrines of the Catholic Church. I urged everybody to attend, and the house was crowded.

I had no idea that others than Roman Catholics would be present. That night I stated that Catholic teaching on the subject of Confession was this: That no one in the world could obtain forgiveness of his sins unless he confessed them to a Catholic priest, and that no one could receive the Holy Communion unless he received the wafer of the Host which is consecrated by the priest of the Roman Catholic Church when he says mass on the altar which changes the wafer into the body, blood, and the soul and divinity of Jesus Christ. I offered to prove these propositions to the whole world.

This resulted in my coming into possession of my first Bible. With three years in the Seminary in a study for the priesthood, I had never seen a Bible or had one in my hands in that institution. After my dogmatic statement, Emile Smith, a Methodist, not a French Acadian, but reared among the Acadians, who spoke their language, arose and demanded proof. He asked me if my offer included proving my propositions by the Bible or some other book. I told him I would prove the same by the Bible. He at once took a New Testament from his pocket and said, "I have been reading this for years and have never read that and while it may be true, I have never seen it." Several Frenchmen arose in anger and said to me, "Do you want us to put him out?" I replied, "No, he is one of those crazy fellows who does not understand what he is reading about." So in fear, he took his family and left, but at the door he held his New Testament up before us and said, "My brother, may God have mercy and make the scales fall from your eyes and help you to understand His will. I will pray for you." I replied somewhat in anger, "I don't want your prayers." After he left anyone can easily imagine how embarrassed I was after agreeing to prove my propositions by the Bible when I had never had one in my hands.

The following will explain why I had never read the Bible or had one: French Acadian Catholic children at their first Communion, take an oath not to allow a Bible to come into their homes. When my mother, at the age of twelve, participated in her first Communion, the priest commanded the children to raise their hands and place their left hands over their hearts in front of a large crucifix and swear to Almighty God that they would never let a Bible enter their homes. The Catholic Church teaches that the church alone is able to interpret the Bible and private interpretation is forbidden. Neither in the Convent, nor in the Seminary had I seen a Bible or heard one read. The text books consisted of the Pope's own interpretation.

To return to my story, the night my Methodist friend accepted my challenge, I dismissed the service and went to my room to sleep, but could not rest or sleep. Very early the next morning I started to the home of the priest in Mermentau. He was not up when I arrived. When I called him he asked what I wanted so early. I told him what had taken place at the services when Smith challenged me to prove my assertions by the Bible after I accepted his challenge. He said I had made a serious mistake, that I should never challenge anyone, because that was for priests only to do. I asked him if my propositions were not the doctrines of the church and in the Bible. He replied that it was not in the Bible exactly as I stated it. I asked him where I could find all of God's word, all of God's revelation to man. He answered, "In the Bible, however it is in the Catholic Bible. All other Bibles are Protestant Bibles and they are false." I asked him if he had a Catholic

Bible for sale and he answered, "Yes, I have one, but it is very expensive, and, furthermore," he continued, "you cannot understand it. I have thirteen years of college work and cannot understand it. The Pope alone can understand the Bible." I asked him for the price of the Bible and he told me it would cost me four dollars. I gave him the money and took the Bible and asked him if he was sure that the Bible was God's Word. He replied, "Yes."

I returned to my preaching mission and began to search the Bible to find statements with which to meet my Methodist friend. I felt sure I would find the teachings in the Bible of the Roman Catholic Church. To my utter surprise, the more I read it, the less I found of what I was looking for with which to meet Smith.

I called upon the priest and asked him why the Bible taught one way and we were practicing another. He said, "You see I told you you could not understand the Book." I replied, "I do understand it," and proved to him that I understood what I read. Failing to obtain satisfaction from this priest, I went to other priests and even to the Bishop. They all told the same thing and urged me to stop reading the Bible as it was hard to understand, but I would not heed their advice. I returned home and got down on my knees and read and studied in that manner for days. After six months of close study sometimes on my knees for days, I became convinced that the Book was God's eternal word. I was convinced it was the truth and that if I was to be saved, I would have to do what God commanded in the New Testament.

Divided Protestantism, so many different churches under different names and teaching different doctrines was a puzzle to me also. I could not understand why there were so many denominations unless what Catholic leaders had taught me was true, that each had their own Bible. I decided to see if this was true. I visited all the preachers in Crowley and requested them to sell me a Bible. This they would not do, but each gave me a Bible. I had thirteen Bibles to compare. I soon learned that I had been taught a falsehood by Roman Catholic leaders, for all the Bibles were alike in subject matter.

In order to find out why there was too much confusion, my next decision was to visit all the thirteen Protestant preachers in Crowley and ask them to explain why they were affiliated with different churches and have them give me their platform. They received me gladly and spent much time in telling me of their faith. Each was apparently anxious to convert me to his church, and one offered to make me a missionary to my people on a salary not to be despised.

When I had heard all of them present their platforms, I was more puzzled than ever. It was enough to drive one into unbelief. I was so confused I hardly knew what to do. I fell on my face and asked God to help, praying, "God, I have found out that I was a deceived man for twenty-eight years. If you will have mercy and help me to see through all this confusion and save my soul, I will never let anyone deceive me again. If I am deceived again it will be by your own Word."

I purchased composition books in which to write down chapter and verse on each subject. For example: Wherever I found the word "church," I would make a note of the chapter and verse. I did likewise with other subjects. After a careful examination of the New Testament, I decided there was no church I knew of which taught what the Bible taught. I

then decided that if I was the only man in the world to practice what I believed the Bible taught, I would do so.

I had learned in reading the Bible that I had not been Scripturally baptized. I went to the Baptist preacher, Brother Carpenter, and asked him if he would baptize me on my confession of faith in Jesus Christ. He told me he would not unless I joined the Baptist Church. I told him I could not do that because it was un-Scriptural. The Bible says nothing about a Baptist church. The next day I met the Methodist preacher on the street and told him Brother Carpenter refused to baptize me. He replied, "I will baptize you." I informed him that he would not, for he had presented his platform when I called upon the preachers and his views on baptism did not correspond with the "One baptism" taught in the New Testament.

I went to see a friend and told him my story and my desire to be baptized Scripturally. I requested him to baptize me and then I in turn would baptize him. It was agreed that this would take place the afternoon of the next day.

That very day, under the Providence of God, Brother W. J. Johnson, a preacher of the Church of Christ, who was holding a meeting in Iota, La., came to see me. He had heard of my struggle and search for the truth. On July 5th, 1915, this young preacher came to my door and introduced himself. Thirteen preachers had talked with me and left me in confusion. I was not anxious to talk to him. I asked him to what denomination he belonged. To my surprise, he replied, "None, I am just a member of the Church of Christ which you read about in the New Testament." I told him my convictions and decision. He insisted that he be given an opportunity to talk with me. I informed him he need not waste any precious time and that the only way I would study with him was his permitting me to ask questions and then he turn to the chapter and verse and let me read the answers in the Bible. To that he agreed cheerfully. We studied together for hours, and about 5:00 p. m., he said, "I must go and preach tonight. I will see you again." I replied, "No matter where you have to go or what you have to do, I believe Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and what can prevent my being baptized?" He wept and asked me if there was water near, and said, "I will baptize you." We drove about four miles and he baptized me. As we entered the water he sang the beautiful hymn, "Blessed Assurance, Jesus is Mine."

I told him I had to tell thousands of my people, my friends, who were not saved, and knew not the way to God. He informed me that I was free in Christ Jesus to do so.

Friday night, July 16th, 1915, I preached my first Gospel sermon after my baptism. The subject was, "What Must I Do To Be Saved?" How happy I was to see forty-eight respond to the invitation and I baptized them the same hour of the night. My second sermon, Sunday morning, July 18th, resulted in eleven more, and that afternoon, sixteen more.

From that day until the present I have continued preaching, baptizing, organizing churches and establishing mission points. To the present, I have baptized over six thousand persons, mostly French Acadian Roman Catholics. We have six active churches and forty-two mission stations. Two fine young men are being trained in my home and are helping me in the work: Bernard Fontenot and Hollins Duhon. (I knew both men. - ch).

Very few of the natives are educated enough to help teach in the Bible Schools. These French Acadians are among the very poorest in this world's goods with large families to support and poorly housed. Seventy-five per cent of the adults can neither read nor write, nor can they speak the English language. It is not that way with the young people of today, for the compulsory school law compels parents to send their children to school from the age of six to fourteen years. The state furnishes the text books and other necessary supplies free of charge.

After I had seen the light in all its beauty and purity, I went to see my Methodist friend, Emile Smith, and begged his pardon for the harsh words I had spoken against him and thanked him for what he had done for me. I was convinced God had used him to help me to Christ. I told him that I had made a careful study of the Bible and had found the right church and doctrine. I asked him if he would be willing to study with me. He expressed himself as being willing and said whatever the Book commanded him to do, he was ready to obey. We studied the question of the name for the church and its members, then the question of Christian baptism. What a joy it was to me to baptize him and his wife and three children. He in turn opened the Methodist church in Mermentau for me to preach. I baptized sixty-three Methodists and hundreds of Roman Catholics in that vicinity.

At the beginning of the work, the Catholic Church made every effort possible, except to destroy our lives, to put a stop to the work. I received several blackhand letters, threats to burn my home, threats to blast my home and family to pieces. I was brought into court twice under false accusations. Several times I was shot at, but escaped injuries. After it appeared unsafe to remain in Crowley, my friends advised me to move to Jennings for protection. Jennings was populated by many people from the North who were Protestants. We suffered untold persecutions, but God spared our lives that this Mission might grow to what it is now.

[Concluding note: Though outside influences could not stop this great movement, it has been hindered greatly by divisive forces within. From the Midwest, preachers came down and introduced instrumental music in some churches. Brother R. H. Boll influenced some with premillennial teachings. These and other matters were made into dividing issues. I once preached in a meeting in Crowley where there were four congregations, neither of which recognized fellowship with the others. How sad! When will we learn that we are our own enemy? Maybe it has improved since I left Louisiana. -CH]

(Cecil Hook; July 2003) []