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The Rock Whence We Are Hewn

BY W. A. CRISWELL

The Old Testament prophets had a habit of calling their people back to a remembrance of the days of their forefathers. Isaiah cries in Isaiah 51:1,2: "Look unto the rock whence ye are hewn, and to the hole of the pit whence ye are digged. Look unto Abraham your father, and unto Sarah that bare you."

Upon the solemn assembly of our people in the 125th year of our Southern Baptist Convention, it is good for us that we look back upon those beginning days that gave us birth and to remember those deep spiritual commitments that have made us a blessing under God to the nations of the world.

In the years gone by, in the 18th and early 19th century, the Baptists in America were a weak, disunited, divided, argumentative group of small, dissenting churches. Our story was hectic, full of sound and furor, characterized by feudin', fussin' and fightin'. We had fallen prey to that everlasting tendency on the part of God's people to turn aside from the heavenly calling and to bog down in the morass and quagmire of littleness, divisiveness and dissension. Israel had done that. They refused their high privilege to be the priests for all the earth (representing God to man and man to God, Exodus 19:6) and fell into a dozen quarreling sects, all of which vied with each other in calling the rest of the world Gentile dogs. The first Christian churches had done that. The tremendous missionary thrust of the first Christian centuries was blunted in its world conquest of evangelism by separating into a thousand warring deviates, sometimes splitting the entire civilized world, according to the sarcastic observation of Edward Gibbon, over a Greek iota. Baptists have been no different. In days past we have lost our spiritual vision in warring over inconsequentials.

When I was in the seminary, Dr. John R. Sampey and Dr. A. T. Robertson often told the story of a church that divided after a fierce fight over the location of a piano. The Executive Board of the State Association went out to the church to settle the fight and they failed ignominiously. Then the entire faculty of the Southern Seminary went out to the church to mediate the massacre and they failed ingloriously. The fight was to the death. The church split wide open and the dissidents departed to organize a church on another hill. You can imagine my amazement, therefore, when I found myself as a young student the pastor of the old war horse who led fight in that split. He had retired in his old age and was then living with his aged maiden sister, named Lizzie.

Often I went to see him, sitting in his big chair, holding a gold-headed cane between his hands. However his interest in life may have waned with the mounting years, he would revive again when I asked him to recount how he "fit 'em" and how he "fought 'em" over the "pianer." Upon a day when I was listening to his fiery story of the altercation, I placed by hand on his arm and said: "Brother Q.J., there is a question I have wanted to ask you during all these years. Where did you want that 'pianer'? In front of the pulpit or over on the platform with the choir?" The old man studied and studied. He thought and thought. He began to tap restlessly on the floor with the gold-headed cane. Finally he raised his voice and called to his maiden sister, "Lizzie, O Lizzie, come here." His aged sister appeared in the doorway. He looked at her and said, "Lizzie, where *did* I want that pianer?"

This is a picture of the Baptists of America many years ago. They were a feudin', fussin', fightin' lot. The first century that followed the formation of the first Baptist church in America at Providence, Rhode Island, in 1639 is in our history a dreary, cantankerous and thoroughly despiritualized era. After our first 100 years we had about 51 Baptist churches split into seven or eight different Baptist bodies. Then something happened. Something marvelous. Something of God.

Adoniram Judson and his wife, Ann Hasseltine, became Baptists in India and were baptized by the Carey Mission in Calcutta. Soon after, Luther Rice, their missionary companion, was also baptized by William Carey's group into the Baptist faith and fellowship. Here were missionaries far away from home and cut off from their pedobaptist denominational ties. Because of their new Baptist allegiance, they had no means of support. It was decided after prayer that the Judsons would remain on the field in India, later in Burma, while Luther Rice returned to America to seek support for these unsought, but God-appointed, God-given missionaries.

When Luther Rice was born in 1783, there were about 35,000 of these factionalized, dissenting, contentious Baptists in America. Every fifth Sunday they met in their associational meetings to debate doctrinal subjects posited by one of the elders in their churches. Their time was consumed in arguing and debating over theoretical, theological inexactitudes. When Luther Rice appeared, his presence and his message was nothing short of a celestial phenomen. Up and down the Atlantic seaboard and across the Alleghenies into Kentucky and Tennessee he went from one debating Baptist group to the other, pleading the cause of world missions, laying upon the heart of the pastors and the churches the mandate and the outreach of the Great Commission. And the brethren listened. Constrained by the Holy Spirit and the burden of a lost world, our forefathers turned aside from their fifth Sunday forensic sessions to face the task of winning the earth to Jesus. Luther Rice organized them into state conventions and finally into a national convention for the support of world evangelism.

"Look unto the rock whence ye are hewn and to the hole of the pit whence we are digged." Our Baptist denomination in America was born in a great necessity, a great program, a great doctrinal conviction, a great cooperative movement. We have tremendously grown through the years in response to that dedication. As we have forsaken

our littleness, selfishness, and divisiveness and have assumed the nobler commitment of prayer, intercession, missions and evangelism, we have been blest of God as few other people in the earth.

I.

We were born in a great mission commitment. It was thrust upon us of God. It was something God did. The eyes of our forefathers were blinded to the call of the dying world. Then God opened their eyes and they began to see, and seeing they began to respond, and responding, they became instruments of world evangelization in God's hands. The year of 1812 was one of the greatest years in the story of Christendom and the greatest year in American Baptist history. That is the year that Adoniram and Ann Hasseltine Judson and Luther Rice were baptized into the Lall Bazar Baptist Church in Calcutta, India. As I stood at that sacred place and read the holy inscription above that baptistry, I felt that I was standing at the birthplace of our Baptist denomination, looking at "the hole of the pit from whence we were digged."

In 1813 when Luther Rice returned from India to America, converted on a foreign field to Baptist principles, doctrines and practices, he faced a situation which would have made a soul less courageous quail in despair. The churches, scattered from Maine to Georgia and from the Atlantic to the frontier beyond the Alleghenies, had no communication with each other. There was no viable union, no cooperation. They were only a congeries of scattered churches, loosely connected through membership in some small, local Baptist association. There was no convention. There was no denomination. There were no schools and seminaries. There were no religious periodicals or publishing houses. There were no mission boards or evangelizing agencies. There were no institutes, alleviating human ills. There was no national or state program. But Luther Rice did not despair. Even when a stroke of paralysis left him crippled and the ravages of a disease he had contacted in India weakened his endurance, he toiled faithfully on and God blessed his efforts. He organized the churches into state conventions and finally into a national body "to elicit, combine and direct the energies of the entire Baptist denomination" for national and world conquest.

Let me pause here to pay tribute to the peerless Baptist leader, Luther Rice. There has never been in American history a man who toiled more arduously or suffered more from the strain or stress of travel than did Luther Rice. Within a period of 10 years he, and he alone, had transformed the scattered, bickering and locally minded Baptist churches and associations into a militant denomination, united in a program to give their interpretation of Christianity to the whole, wide world. He usually traveled 50 miles a day and preached 3 to 5 times. Often he would ride all night to keep an appointment. Once he reported 6 hours of sleep in 4 days. In one of his reports he says that he traveled 6,000 miles in dreary portions of the country, through wilderness and across mountains and valleys, in heat and cold, by day and night, in weariness, painfulness, fastings and loneliness. But no fear had been permitted to prey upon his spirit, nor even inquietude to disturb his peace.

The first, deep, bonding tie that holds us togeher is this missionary passion of Luther Rice. There are nations to win, there are souls to save, there are churches to be built, there are missionaries to support, and we are called of God to do it.

I traveled one time with one of our medical missionaries through the heart of Africa. He had gathered the outcast leper into clan settlements to minister to their physical and spiritual needs. In each settlement was the little dispensary and the little mud church. As I watched him work in the name of our Saviour, I thought: "Who sent this missionary? We did. Who bought this medicine? We did. Who built this mud church? We did." It is enough to bind us together forever. We cannot fail our Lord of His people in the earth.

There's a call comes ringing o'er the restless wave;
There are souls to rescue, there are souls to save.

Let us pray that grace may everywhere abound
And a Christ-like spirit everywhere be found.

Let us not grow weary in the work of love,
Let us gather jewels for a crown above.

If ever we lose that missionary passion and commitment, we shall dissolve like a rope of sand. Our world-wide mission program holds us together like cables of steel. We may differ over many things, but we are one in this; namely, the desire to see men brought to Christ throughout the nations of the globe, "that in all things our Lord might have the pre-eminence."

II.

"Look unto the rock whence ye are hewn and to the hole of the pit whence ye are digged." We were born, not only in a great missionary response, but also in a deep, doctrinal conviction. Luther Rice, Adoniram Judson and Ann Hasseltine were not Baptists. They belonged to another communion. They were sent out as missionaries by another denomination. But they *became* Baptists and they did so through a study of the Word of God. They remained Baptists at personal sacrifice and infinite cost. They suffered for the faith as did their martyred Baptist predecessors. It means something to be a Baptist. What does it mean? Am I afraid or reluctant to say?

A couple were describing to me the new community church to which they now belonged. They exclaimed in abounding enthusiasm: "Oh, it is wonderful. You don't have to believe anything to join our church!" How unusual! "Believe" is a tremendous word in the Bible. Through it we are saved and joined to Christ (John 20:31; Acts 16:31). By it we are assembled together in the common faith (Acts 11:17, 18) whether Jew or Gentile, Greek or barbarian, Roman or provincial, male or female, bond or free, black or white, poor or rich. Even as it is written, "I believe, and therefore have I spoken: we also believe and therefore speak" (II Cor. 4:13). We believe something about God, about Jesus Christ, about the Bible, about the soul and destiny of man, about the church, about the Holy Spirit and about the many other doctrines (teachings) of divine revelation. And believing, we speak, preach, teach, evangelize and call to repentance and faith in the name of the Lord Jesus. It is these common convictions that bind us together.

Sometimes we are told that the cardinal doctrine of the Baptist faith is soul liberty, freedom of conscience, the right to believe anything and everything or nothing. This persuasion we hold in common with the famous infidels of history, a Thomas Paine of the American Revolution, a Robert Ingersoll of the lecture platform, a Francois Voltaire of the French libertines. But is there not something else to distinguish us from the infidels? Voltaire is quoted as saying, "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it." Baptists say that, too. But do we not say something more?

A man is invited to become a Baptist. He asks a simple question, "What do you Baptist believe?" "Oh," we reply, "you can believe anything and be a Baptist. There are Mohammedan Baptists, there are Hindu Baptists, there are atheist Baptists, there are infidel Baptists, there are Bible-rejecting Baptists, Christ-denying Baptists." One speaks up to say, "I personally am a Mary Baker Glover Patterson Eddy Baptist." Really? No! There are deep convictions we hold about the faith once for all delivered to the saints. We have never been slow or tardy or reluctant to write out, to speak out and to publish abroad those doctrinal beliefs. It is unthinkable that we would belong to a group which refuses to say what we believe.

One says: "But you can't say anything about Christ. That would be creedal. You can't say anything about the Bible. That would be creedal. You can't say anything about the ordinances. That would be creedal." Another says, "You can't tell me what to believe. That is what it is to be a Baptist. We believe in anything, or nothing." It becomes absurd and ridiculous. We do believe and that something is revealed to us from God out of heaven and it is written in God's Holy Book for all to read, to accept, to preach and to die for! It is these doctrines that give us strength and godly courage in a godless world, otherwise we are like the ten Israelites who returned from the promised land with a grapevine instead of a backbone, or like the well-used cliche "if you do not stand for something, you fall for anything."

If the God of the Bible is really God, then we cannot believe Him, accept Him and serve Him each in His own way. Rather we must believe, accept and serve Him each in *His* way. We must not seek to alter our theology to conform to the passing philosophical fancies and fashions of the day. We must judge the teachings of men by the teachings of God. It is folly to bend theology to fit man when the Bible teaches that men must be altered to conform to the theology of God. A personal faith does not mean that we personally invent it, shape it, or use it as we please. A personal faith means that we have personally chosen it, accepted it, do believe it and, in the case of Baptists, we hold it in common with millions of others who likewise accept it.

Are we to change with the changing times? Only in our methods, our approaches and our nomenclature. Our great doctrines and principles never change. God does not change. The Almighty says, "I am the Lord, I change not" (Mal. 3:6). Christ does not change. He is the same yesterday, today and forever (Heb. 13:8). God's Word does not change. "Forever, O God, thy Word is fixed in heaven" (Ps. 119:89). Man does not change. He is essentially the same fallen creature, whether in the stone age or in this age, whether on the moon or on Mars, whether he is killing his fellowman with a stone axe or with an atomic bomb. And redemption is ever needed and ever the same. "Neither is there salvation in any other, for

there is none other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

We must maintain our doctrines and our principles or lose our unity and our message. There will be no peace to us and no offer of hope to a troubled world is we lose the doctrinal basis for the gospel we preach.

And why would we choose to turn aside from the gospel message or be hesitant to espouse it or be slow to publish it? It was through doctrinal conviction that the little band of Baptists in London, England, published their Confession of Faith in 1644. It was through doctrinal conviction that the Baptists of Philadelphia published their Articles of Faith in 1742 and the New Hampshire Baptists their Confession in 1833. It was because of deep, doctrinal conviction that our Southern Baptist Convention published their Articles of Faith in 1925 and again in 1963. In these tremendous Confessions our compeers were not placing our churches in theological strait jackets. There is room and to spare in these doctrinal declarations for variety and differences of opinion. But always our life of discussions and expression should be in that Bible-revealed framework of the truth of God. We are to be like the mercury in a thermometer—many changes, many differing degrees, many ups and downs, but always inside the thermometer. We are to be like the life in a home—many discussions, many differences, many tears and heartaches, but always in the family.

Our institutions ought to reflect those great doctrinal commitments. Our literature ought to teach it. Our preachers and pastors and denominational leaders ought to preach it. And when we send out missionaries, they ought to declare in other lands the same marvelous, glorious, glad tidings of God's eternal, revealed truth. When we cease to believe in Christ we are no longer Christians. When we cease to believe in Baptist doctrines we are no longer Baptists. We have become something else.

III.

"Look unto the rock whence ye are hewn and to the hole of the pit whence ye are digged." We were born not only in a great missionary responsibility and in a deep, doctrinal conviction, but also in a vast cooperative effort, in an enterprise of common commitment. Luther Rice, the missionary statesman and strategist, by divine wisdom was led to see that what no one church could do, an association of churches could do and do mightily and effectively. Our organized Baptist work in America, and finally our Southern Baptist Convention, became a viable, vibrant, quickening body through the willingness of the churches to share together a common program of missions, evangelism and education. This is still our only possible avenue of facing the needs and the tides of evil of our teeming, troubled world. We must do it together. One of us alone is too weak, too frail and too easily broken. It takes us all in strength and power. An aged, dying father called his seven sons around him. He gave each one a stick and said, "Break it." Each son easily broke his separate stick. The old father then bound seven sticks in a bundle, gave the fasces to his eldest son and said, "Break it." He could not. Then the second was commanded to try. He could not. Nor could any of the rest. "So", said the father, "is it to be of you. Alone you are weak, together you are strong." Our ultimate strength lies not only in our common devotion to our Lord, but also in our common determination to serve Him as an association of churches, a true fellowship of the saints, a holy and heavenly *koinonia*. Otherwise, we are hopelessly defeated before the onslaughts of the world.

One church can have a Sunday School, but if we are to have a Sunday School program we must have a Sunday School Board and a denominational framework in which it can move. One church can have a revival meeting, but if we are to have an evangelism program we must have an evangelistically oriented denominational outreach. One church can have a missionary, but if we are to have a mission program we must have a mission board, working in the circle of a denominationally dedicated group of mission-minded churches. The denomination, which represents the combined strength of our cooperating churches, is all important as we accept the heavenly mandate to disciple, to baptize, and to teach the nations of the world. We may be in our churches independent sovereignties, democratic in government, without an over-lording, ecclesiastical hierarchy; but we are of one mind and of one accord now and forever in our passion to reach the whole earth with the gospel of reconciliation and redemption.

This is our past. This is our present. This is our future. We have no other Lord but Jesus. We have no other book but the Bible. We are moved by no other dedication but serving Christ. We have no other goal but preaching and implementing the gospel. Here we stand, so help us God. We can do no other. And in this commitment we are bound together forever in an unbreakable, unbeatable association and denomination of churches under the leadership of Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Bring me my bow of burning gold,
Bring me my arrows of desire,
Bring me my spear, O clouds unfold,
Bring me by chariot of fire.
We shall not cease from battle strife,
Nor shall the sword sleep in our hand,
Till we have built Jerusalem
In this fair and pleasant land.