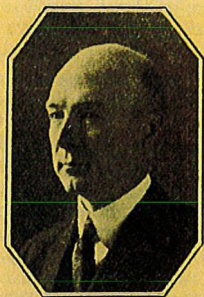


*Our Present
Denominational
Situation*



By
W. J. MCGLOTHLIN
*President Southern
Baptist Convention*

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE
Southern Baptist Convention
Nashville, Tenn.

Our Present Denominational Situation

BY PRESIDENT W. J. MCGLOTHLIN

FOR some time our denomination has been in serious difficulties. For several years it has been passing through a period of depression, complaining, and fault finding. Many of our people have become discouraged and disheartened, while others have lost their enthusiasm and devotion to kingdom work. We have seemed to be united in nothing but the opinion that the denomination is in a bad way.

Let us take our stand today on this point of agreement and ask ourselves two questions. (1) "Why and how did we fall into our present situation?" and (2) "How are we to get out and on to higher ground?" If we find the causes of our depression we can better find the way out. What, then, has brought us to our present discouraged and discouraging situation? The causes, in my opinion, are numerous. Let us look at some of the more important ones.

I. WHY AND HOW DID WE FALL INTO OUR PRESENT SITUATION?

1. It is frequently said that the 75 Million Campaign is the cause of our difficulties and there is occasionally a tendency to blame our leaders of that day for our difficulties. But let us remind ourselves that *we*, all of us, went into that campaign together. It was not the editors or the secretaries of the boards or the seminary and college presidents, but the whole body of us who went into that campaign. Those of us who were at the Atlanta Convention will never forget the enthusiasm and unanimity with which the Southern Baptist Convention voted to raise for kingdom purposes seventy-five million dollars in the next five years. So far as I can remember, there was not a dissenting vote on the proposition. If, therefore, anybody is guilty of blundering, we are all guilty. If anybody is to be blamed, we are all to be blamed.

We should remember too that many of the debts on our Convention boards and institutions as well as upon our State boards and institutions were not contracted by the boards themselves but by the action of the Conventions. The boards in many cases but carried out the instructions of the governing Conventions, and all of us constitute these Conventions. This simply means that all of us are responsible for the present situation, a consideration which ought to silence much of the criticism which is now current.

2. Let us admit frankly that we were over-optimistic at the beginning of the 75 Million Campaign. That was the day of immense undertakings. The total energies of the nation were enlisted as never before; it was easy to do big things; the spirit of sacrifice was everywhere and the denomination caught the enthusiasm and confidence of the times. The war was being fought on a credit; nobody dreamed that the nation would fail and it was inevitable that the denomination should be moved by the spirit of the times. We were too optimistic and simply undertook more than we could do. Admitting this fact, what shall we do about it now? There is nothing to do but forget it. What is done is done. Nothing is more futile than crying over spilt milk. We simply undertook more than our spiritual and material resources warranted and are now paying the penalty of our undue optimism.

3. One of the reasons for this situation is that we forgot the lessons of history. We should have known that war always brings inflation, to be followed by a period of deflation and depression. We ought to have known that the flush and easy times could not continue forever and that generous subscriptions would be paid with difficulty or not at all. We forgot the lessons of history and are now paying dearly for our lapse of memory. In my State we subscribed nearly two millions more than our quota, and I well remember the hours of vigorous discussion which we had in our efforts to dispose of this "overage" properly. As things turned out, it has not been the "overage" which has troubled us but the "underage," for, as in other States, we failed to raise in cash the quota which had been assigned to us.

4. Since the close of the war, the entire American nation has suffered a moral and spiritual as well as a financial deflation, and we Baptists could not escape this national lapse. Led by our great President, Woodrow Wilson, the nation was on a high plane of idealism at the beginning of the 75 Million Campaign. We had gone into the war to fight for freedom, "to make the world safe for democracy." We wanted nothing for ourselves, we were crusaders for peace, freedom, and righteousness. We poured out our treasures of wealth and blood without stint or thought of reward. But, alas, our high idealism as a nation has evaporated. Our moral life has declined, as seen in our crime record and our salacious literature, our national idealism has faded into national selfishness and narrowness.

As a denomination, it was impossible that we should escape all the effects of this national decline. The spirit of sacrifice and high devotion to the great objects of the kingdom of God has waned and weakened among us. Religiously as otherwise we are in the backwash of the war. Our people do not now look at missions, education, and evangelism as they did before and during the war. We have been religiously deflated, we are below par.

5. Another very important factor in our financial difficulties has been the coming of many new ways of spending money during the last ten or fifteen years, and our Baptist people have done and are doing their share of the spending. Think of the cost of the automobile and the effects of its operation upon the work of the kingdom of God; likewise of the radio, of the moving picture shows, of the luxuries of the home and other things which have come in and absorbed so much of our surplus. In proportion to income, the surplus of the average church member is now probably lower than it was fifteen years ago. Since most people give out of their surplus, giving ceases when there is no surplus. Unquestionably the coming of these many new ways of spending money has had a disastrous effect upon our giving.

6. Buying on the installment plan seems to be one of the aftermaths of the war and it has

had disastrous effects upon our economic life. The war was fought on the installment plan; that is, the nation borrowed the money to prosecute the war. The installment plan of selling and buying has mortgaged the future and put the whole world in debt. Installment buying was a new name for an old and ugly thing—debt—but this was hardly realized at first. People bought automobiles, radios, electric refrigerators, stoves, furniture, houses, and built their churches and operated their farms on the installment plan. Gradually we have become conscious that we have just been accumulating plain debts, that installments must be paid as notes used to be paid. We are shocked and discouraged, we are putting off the Lord's cause while we try to settle with our other creditors.

7. In many of our churches, especially the larger and more prosperous ones, the cost of equipment and operation has increased greatly in the last few years. Enlarged emphasis on the educational work of the churches is the principal cause of these increases. Buildings had to be enlarged or erected new and had to be equipped, workers had to be increased in numbers and preparation and some of them had to be paid. All of this local work is costing heavily and is absorbing much of our possible gifts, leaving the general objects of the States and of the Southern Baptist Convention to fall on very lean years. Most of this local improvement is good, even necessary for efficiency. None of us can condemn it or wish it otherwise. The strength of our home churches is the basis of all of our work at home and abroad. In time these things will readjust and right themselves, but for the present our general work is suffering because of these local improvements.

8. In much of our Southern territory economic conditions have not been favorable for the last few years. The average man, especially if he lives from farming or industries based directly on farming, has not been prosperous. One bad crop year has followed another. Low prices have followed low prices. Our people simply cannot earn what they were earning a few years ago and naturally this with other things is seriously affect-

ing our giving. We must recognize this as one of the important factors in our present situation.

The above are some of the reasons for the constant decline in our gifts to the general objects of our kingdom work for the last several years.

II. NOW HOW ARE WE GOING TO GET OUT OF OUR PRESENT DIFFICULTIES?

1. First of all, let me assert my own feeling and conviction that we are turning the corner spiritually and that spiritual improvement will be followed by financial improvement. I assume that we are going to get out of our difficulties. I assume this because I believe in and love the work of God, because I believe our work is His work, and because I believe in our Baptist people. To me it is unthinkable that God's work committed to God's people should ultimately and finally fail. There is light ahead.

2. In the second place, I should like to emphasize my conviction that things are not altogether as bad as they seem. We have debts, many debts, much debt—debts on local churches, debts on State boards and institutions, debts on Convention institutions and boards—but very little of this large indebtedness is due to money lost or wasted or unwisely expended. Our debts are for the most part represented by solid and substantial additions to our equipment and efficiency. These additions are now in use and are everywhere contributing their full share to our service in the Lord's cause. We have been building on the installment plan just as the States have built roads and schools on the installment plan. It may be that we have gone a little too fast and too far, but we have not often gone wrong. The things purchased with our debts are now in our possession and are valuable assets.

3. In the third place, I wish to call your attention to the fact that most of the causes of our failures and heart burnings were entirely beyond our control. They were conditions that affected the entire American nation and therefore necessarily influenced us Southern Baptists. It would have required a miracle to enable us to escape when everybody else was so pro-

foundly influenced. The miracle did not occur and we are where we are.

4. We shall need great patience and broad views of the situation. Many of the adverse conditions which face us we cannot ourselves change. They are deeper and far broader than our denomination. Time will be a necessary factor in our recovery. Some of these conditions will change only as the nation comes back to its more moral, spiritual, and generous self. We are in the midst of a great social and economic revolution to which many adjustments, psychological and spiritual as well as material, will be necessary. We must not become impatient or discouraged because recovery is slow.

But while we cannot ourselves do everything necessary to recovery, *we can do something* toward the rehabilitation of our people and our work, and I wish to recommend four lines of effort.

1. We must set ourselves with firm will and profound trust in our God to work out of our troubles. With God's help they are not too great for us. We cannot do it in a day or a year, but we can do it. With all the firmness we can command, let us resolve to come out.

2. Each one of us needs to say with Joshua, "As for me and my house, we will serve Jehovah." We have been finding fault with each other, telling each other how it ought to be done; we have been so busy trying to get other people to do their work that we have often neglected our own. As I turned away from the Convention at New Orleans my deepest feeling was a sense of the need that each of us should go home determined to do *his own work* before the Lord, whatever others might or might not do. Our obligations are personal and individual and the failure of others in no measure releases or reduces our obligations. The determination of each of us to do *his own work* would solve our problems.

3. The *work* of the denomination must again be presented to our people. A whole generation has grown up since we began to talk of campaigns, programs, and other abstract things. The younger generation does not know about mis-

sions, our educational institutions, our orphanages and hospitals, our evangelism. They have heard only of programs and it is not the program but the concrete constituent parts of the program that carry the appeal to the average man. We must again find a way to present the great causes of the kingdom to our people. The Christian heart will respond to this appeal and the Christian pocketbook will be opened to support it.

4. Most of all, we need a great, profound, searching revival, one that will renovate and renew the nation. Local revivals or even denominational revivals will not meet all of our needs. Our nation needs a revival. Such a revival would fill our coffers with money, our schools with students, our pulpits with men afire with God and our pews with people imbued with the spirit of love and sacrifice which was in our Lord Jesus Christ. Each of us needs to enter into a silent and solemn covenant to pray and work for such a revival. Then the kingdom will be coming again with power.