

In
the
Spirit
of
Christ

Consider Our Mission



Carl E. Bates

As long as I can remember, Southern Baptists have been concerned about their mission in the world. In my opinion, a good part of the tension that expresses itself in our annual meetings grows out of sincere concern about our mission.

It is in this fellowship that the teacher, the pastor, the laity and convention personnel—each, according to his particular point of view—finds the freedom to express himself. I believe that the willingness to innovate, which increases the incidence of mistakes, is born of a sincere desire to carry out our mission in the world.

At times we have found partial answers and, as a result, called for a reorganization of our forces. At other times we have tasted success under circumstances which we assumed existed universally and, as a consequence, expected every church to “be just like ours.” Sometimes we discovered methods which seemingly were fail-proof and, long after their productiveness had run its course, were contending earnestly “for and against.” We have, on occasion, flowed toward poles like filings to a magnet. Sometimes we flowed far enough away from one another until hearing became a problem—speaking across that space was even more difficult.

Concern

But, always and ever, the one thing which has been a constant among us is concern.

It is so tonight. We have met in St. Louis again to bear witness to our concern for a lost world. It is my hope that, along with whatever else may be said about our meeting here, the news media will report that our being here and expressing ourselves in deliberative sessions, when best understood, is expressive of this concern.

We have come with an awareness that our nation and our world teeters on the brink of disaster. I can almost hear someone saying within himself: “The world has

This is the text of the President's Address at the Southern Baptist Convention. Carl E. Bates is pastor of First Church, Charlotte, N.C. He was re-elected president.

known crisis since Babel, so what's new?” And he is right, but I believe the present crisis is different.

For instance, for the first time in the history of our nation there is no Christian consensus. Christian influence is at an all-time low. Law is no longer king—something called “sociological averages” has taken its place. During the span of my ministry my generation has largely turned its back on God and, in His place, enthroned things which the present generation couldn't care less about.

Moved from Country

And, oh yes, we moved from the country to the city and, in the process, lost our peace and when our children came along we had nothing really worthwhile to pass on to them. Some of us who had something worthwhile failed to transmit it under the cowardly fear of “alienating” our children and so we lost them anyway.

Another thing deepens the crisis for us: We reared a generation of Baptists who are almost totally ignorant of our doctrines. This, in my lifetime—so, I must share the blame.

And to that, this: The sense of decency in our land, which produced a corresponding sense of guilt, is gone.

And this: The pastor is no longer thought of first when a crisis arises in the home. The doctor, psychiatrist, marriage counsellor or even “Dear Abby” is called upon before the pastor.

And this: Many pastors and churches are sick of each other and this carnal nausea has turned many of our church

houses into nothing more than irrelevant grandeur.

What shall we say to all of this? How shall we bring this continuing concern to bear upon the crisis?

If we should ask John Bennett, editor of the book, *Christian Social Ethics in a Changing World*, he would say: “The church is sent into the world to transform the institutions and structures of society. The status quo is not providentially ordained. If some political party proposes to do the most for mankind, the church ought to openly declare itself in support of that party.” He is not clear about who is inside or outside the circle of salvation.

Ask another and he will say the Christian witness need not be verbalized in order to make its impact upon the “worlds” of labor, leisure, education, government and even ecclesiastical institutions.

In direct contrast others insist that “one never evangelizes until he stands directly before the heart's door of a sinner and clearly confronts him with the gospel of Christ.”

Still others insist that we must produce a climate conducive to winning the world. If we do not lay down our lives in service to a needy world our declaration of the gospel will fall on deaf ears.

Whose Task?

And if this were not enough, we have found ourselves spending precious time debating whether it is the task of the individual Christian or the organized church to be responsible for evangelizing the lost. Some say it is the responsibility of the individual; others say it is the responsibility of the organized church.

Some have compromised and said: “Personal evangelism is the responsibility of every follower of Christ, whereas mass evangelism is the primary responsibility of local churches and gifted evangelists. Both individuals and churches in all they do should endeavor to make such an im-

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pact upon the world that people will listen to the gospel when it is proclaimed."

My concern has been to find a way to consider our mission in the Spirit of Christ rather than in the spirit of the times. Is there some way to look through His eyes and view in His Spirit our mission?

I think there is. True to the promise of our Lord that "when the comforter comes, He will cause you to remember every thing I have told you" (John 14:26). Matthew tells us: "And when He saw the milling mob, His heart was moved with pity for them, because they were tired and scattered like sheep without a shepherd. Then He said to us, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the reapers are scarce. Pray the Lord of the harvest to send out reapers to His harvest field'" (Matt. 9:36-38).

Present World Crisis

If, in addition to all we have done and are doing, we could take a look at the present world crisis through His eyes, I believe we would find a true channel for our concern and a new understanding of our mission.

For one thing, He reminds us of the ownership of the harvest.

"The harvest is plentiful, but the Lord of the harvest has made it so."

It was my good fortune as a boy to live in the home of a farmer uncle who taught me the first lesson of the harvest. We had broken the land, prepared it for planting and planted it. I wanted to see it come up and ripen for the reaping the next day. I wanted to know what we could do to hasten the day. He said to me in his rustic, backwoods way, "Remember son, you can't make nothing grow! Only the good Lord can do that!"

I remember that farmer uncle tonight and when I am told that if the church does not lay down its life in service to a needy world our declaration of the gospel will fall on deaf ears.

Unwillingness To Serve

It is true that at the heart of most of our problems is our unwillingness to serve in the Spirit of the cross, but, hear me tonight, the harvest is the Lord's. It is ready for the reaping. Never has the ratio between readiness and reapers been so great. The harvest is everywhere, the whole world around, ready.

I like what Ernest Campbell said recently. In a sermon on the tower and the king going to war he said: "None of you would be so stupid as to plan a building unless he could finish it or start a war he could not win. Neither would God! He has the means to win and He means to win!"

**It's up to you,
Southern Baptists,
It's up to you!"**

In the midst of the plastic dance of circumstance, our God has prepared a harvest the proportion of which staggers the mind. No question about it, the harvest is ready.

There is more emptiness, loneliness, uncertainty, despair and hopelessness in our world than perhaps ever before. That's the harvest . . . crisis in innumerable lives all over the world.

Our Lord speaks also the Father's option in view of the harvest.

"Pray that He send."

This leaves no room for the "amateur providence" notion about who is to go. The choice is not ours concerning the person or the place.

Gratitude to God

I want to pause here and express my gratitude to God for having led us to provide six seminaries and mission leadership with vision enough to plan to reap the harvest both at home and abroad. It is my personal hope that we can scotch any talk, if such exists, of cutting back on any phase of our mission outreach.

We have laid our plans in faith, believing and expecting that the Lord of the harvest would exercise His option and send forth into the harvest His laborers. And He is doing so! Wherever Christians gather, He is moving by His Spirit to thrust out those whom He chooses to send.

Some of you come to this meeting tonight under the burden of a call to go. When you stand up to preach next Sunday, you will preach to some with whom He is dealing in a special way. They will be there, maybe standing in the pulpit, with no longer a reason to stay in the pastorate at home but a hundred reasons for going into the harvest fields afar waiting to be reaped.

And what is the key to all of this?

You wouldn't believe it. You will say, "It's all well and good, but it is too idealistic and impractical." And yet, the only order the Lord gave is this: "Pray."

The key to the whole missionary problem is in the hand of God, not of man;

and, according to our Lord, the key is prayer, not ingenious human schemes. Indeed, one could build a strong case against us, based on our hope that if we get busy enough we may somehow avoid and evade the necessity of spiritual concentration.

Our Lord gave His disciples this key. It was not a common-sense key. It was not a medical key. It was not a civilizing key. It was not an educational key, not even an evangelical key. The key is prayer.

Difference in Views

One of the first things that impresses one about this is the difference between our view of prayer and our Lord's view.

Someone is likely to go away from this place thinking: "Well, I had hoped to hear something more practical but all I heard suggested for a world dying in sin was 'pray.' It is absurd to think that God is going to alter things in answer to prayer!" But, that is what Jesus said He would do and, if it is stupidity, it is stupidity based on His redemption.

Can it be that we have said prayers so long until we innoculated ourselves against a consciousness of His continuing presence in our hearts? Or, have we said prayers in the vain hope of postponing an inevitable confrontation with a grieved Spirit by whose help we could really obey our Lord's order. The answer must come from your heart and mine. There it stands, "pray ye the Lord of the harvest that He send forth 'laborers into His harvest.'" "

Perhaps every person here has heard the story which I first heard 25 years ago. It was cast in the setting of our Lord's exaltation and reunion with the angelic host. He was questioned about His plan for continuing His mission on earth. As I recall the story, He indicated that only a small band of disciples were left to continue His ministry. "But suppose they fail?" "Then," said He, "I have no other plan."

No Margin for Failure

Of course, the story cannot be true. There was no margin for failure in redemption's purpose—just the possibility that each generation through disobedience of His orders would fail to fulfill its mission.

This is where we stand tonight. We can recognize the Lord's ownership of the harvest; His option in sending reapers, His orders for His disciples, or we can spend our time and energy in endless discussion about "how to get the show on the road again."

It's up to you, Southern Baptists, it's up to you!