

For release after 10:40 a.m., June 13, 1978

# Where There Is A Vision, The People Flourish

*JIMMY R. ALLEN, president of the Southern Baptist Convention, is a graduate of Howard Payne University, Brownwood, Texas, and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, Texas. He is pastor of First Baptist Church, San Antonio. Dr. Allen has traveled widely preaching both in Europe and Asia. He is a frequent contributor to religious journals and is the author of Peace, Peace.*

## Jimmy R. Allen

**INTRODUCTION:** General Douglas MacArthur was one of the most controversial figures in American history. A recent motion picture about him depicted his life and leadership during World War II and the Korean Conflict. Whatever one's opinion of MacArthur, the scene of his return to the Philippines is a moving one. As he left in defeat and retreat, he had vowed "I shall return." It became a personal vision . . . an obsession to do so. As the tides of war moved, there was strong effort to build a strategy which would leapfrog the Philippines and move on to Japan. He was adamant. He even threatened to take it to the people in political elections. He finally won his way. Though he made it a media event with his famous walk through the surf, the moving moment came when he walked among the wounded and battered survivors of the prison camps and the death marches. He is depicted as moving slowly from one to another saying, "I'm late . . . I'm late . . . I wanted to be here sooner . . . it took longer than I thought . . . I'm late . . . so late."

A world of battered and wounded people stagger through the death marches of this life, barely surviving, helpless and despairing. It is a vision born in the heart of God . . . shared with and by Southern Baptists . . . to set these people free. It moves us with the hope that every prisoner will be able to know the way to life by the end of this century. It is slowly . . . then with more rapidity . . . gripping the imagination of thirteen million Southern Baptist Christians. We have put a name to it . . . Bold Mission Thrust. It is the theme of this Convention session. It will continue to be a theme in years ahead. It encompasses so much of what the Lord has commanded us to be and do. It stretches us to our limits so we can discover that God's resources are unlimited. And we are late . . . so late . . . so very late.

The Scriptures say, "Where there is no vision, the people perish." Proverbs 29:18. Since that is true, the opposite is also true. "Where there is a vision, the people flourish."

Let us examine this vision: Its source, shape, steps toward accomplishment and strength for fulfilling it.

## I. SOURCE OF THE VISION

Schemes, plans, and programs usually come from within our own efforts. We set our goals, work out plans, assess our accomplishments. Visions are entirely different. They come from without. They "dawn" on us. They come when we are alert to challenges and discover ourselves coming up with insights and answers. We begin to see things in the light of God's presence and God's promises. Whether there is a highly

emotional experience or not, this kind of vision comes from God. We are deeply stirred because of a discovery of God's direction . . . of the way He is moving and what He wants us to do about it.

Dr. Edward B. Lindaman, the evangelical Christian space technologist and college president, describes the experience in his new book, "Thinking In Future Tense." He sees it as an exciting difference in perspective . . . the stuff of the vision is often very familiar to us. He says:

"One of life's most fulfilling moments occurs in that split second when the familiar suddenly is transformed into the dazzling aura of the profoundly new . . . The breakthroughs are too infrequent, more uncommon than common; and we are mired most of the time in the mundane and trivial. The shocker: What seems mundane and trivial is the very stuff that discovery is made of. The only difference is our perspective, our readiness to put the pieces together in an entirely new way and to see patterns where only shadows appeared just a moment before."

The stuff of our vision is familiar to us. The Great Commission has included the idea of confronting every person on earth with the gospel since Jesus Christ gave us the command two thousand years ago. Some things, however, are happening to charge the atmosphere in which we are living with a new energy about an old command. There is a stirring across the land . . . as Samuel says it, there is a sound of a moving in the mulberry bushes. God is up to something. Colleges and seminaries are crowded with talented lay people ready to forsake all and follow him . . . anywhere on earth. A sense of urgency stirs us with a deep feeling that time is running out . . . a sense of discovery grips us as God moves to meet our deepest needs.

The vision is old, but it is ever fresh. It is new. A basic principle says that a difference in degree can make a difference in kind. A gentle breeze is simply wind blowing. If the velocity of that wind reaches 185 miles an hour, you have a hurricane. A difference of degree has made a difference in kind. A slap on the face is a blow. A blow hard enough to crush a skull is also a blow, but it is murder. A difference of degree has made a difference in kind.

The velocity of a mission response which doubles our missionaries, doubles our Cooperative Program, escalates our giving to allow new technologies of communication, and puts at least an additional five thousand volunteers full time in the field serving Christ and sharing his gospel . . . That's a difference in degree which can make a difference in kind. The vision is something new.

There is a very real possibility that we are on the edge of the greatest explosion of Christian expansion in the history of Christianity. From time to time in human experience God stirs in such intensity. With the vast resources available, the eagerness of spirit emerging, the sense of expectancy gripping our imaginations and making room for faith to claim the victory, the depths of sacrifice being explored by serious Christians, we may be ready to celebrate a breakthrough which none of us have dared to dream about. If it is to be, it is up to God. If it is to be, it is also up to me.

## II. THE SHAPE OF THE VISION

Visions are intensely personal things. Our collective vision's shape must leave room for each of us to perceive for ourselves what God is doing and how our gifts and skills fit into it. However, there are some common denominators in our vision.

### 1. *We are seeing a confused and searching world.*

Our vision is of a world of confused and searching people. Jesus saw them as sheep without a shepherd. In the vast carnival of our world, we hear the hawkers calling out for attention with varying answers to life's ills. The shills are moving among us, meeting us at our airports with fixed smiles and false messiahs. The voices are strident with anger as they call for overthrow of systems and establishing of yet another materialistic system with a promise of freedom and an end result of tyranny. And the Lord Chaos reigns over the mad festival of pleasure seekers, power brokers, waste makers, searchers running after every new guru, diet, or exercise which promises peace of mind. The spiritual witch doctors of our technological world have many offers but no answers to the deepest needs of the human spirit.

To this world of confusion, our vision leads us with the good news of God's revelation. The record of it is the Bible. The center of it is the risen Lord Jesus Christ. A conviction has emerged and strengthened in my spirit this year. We don't have time nor need to debate the authority and accuracy of the Bible. Our confused world does not need to be treated to the scene of Christians tearing at each others vitals over whether their beliefs are being described in just the right jargon. The urgency is for us to announce His Word, explain His Word, live His Word, share His Word. The Bible is true truth. While we are debating the various ways of describing our ammunition, the enemy is taking our world.

The Korean Conflict revealed an unusual phenomenon. The American Rifleman Magazine told of it during those days. It was discovered that a very large percentage of the time the American soldier with his rifle in hand would see an enemy, have an opportunity to shoot, and fail to use his rifle. As they analyzed it, they changed their training techniques completely. They found that the reasons were: an absence of confidence in the weapon . . . an overdependence on the more dramatic firepower of artillery and air bombardment . . . and a fear of exposure to enemy fire. The Bible is God's gift of our weaponry . . . the Sword of the Lord. When we lose confidence in it, we fail to use it. When we think that the dramatic firepower of sermons and religious testimony and television talk shows will do the task alone, we fail to use it. When we fear that we are not equipped to use it well enough to expose ourselves to enemy fire, we fail to use it. But the basic problem about the Bible is not whether we agree on how to describe its authority, it is whether we trust its promise . . . depend on its power enough to obey its command and to share its message. A confused world needs not theoretical explanations. It needs the one who is God's answer to man's need . . . Jesus.

### 2. *We are seeing a vision of hungry and hurting people.*

There is a yearning in the land. Out of our confusion created by unkept promises and unfulfilled hopes, there is a hunger of spirit. We are weary of the burden of sin and guilt. We are yearning for meaning in lives which are empty and jaded. The fear of death is often exceeded by the fear of life. The time is right for harvest. The battered and used woman at the well (John 4) returns from her experience with Jesus to shout to other battered and used people, "See the One who knows all about me and still gives me the refreshing

water of life." And they are pouring out of the Samaritan villages of our world . . . hungry to know him. A "harvest truly plenteous" while "laborers are few."

To that spiritual hunger our vision also shapes up to envelop the physically hungry. Weary and exhausted multitudes of our world are dying of hunger related diseases in numbers beyond our comprehension. While farmers strike to call attention to their economic plight, our agriculture can produce more and better than any on earth. And we use the hungry of our world to dump our surpluses rather than sensing the calling of God to give our loaves and fishes for feeding them. It is expected that more people will die in our world from hunger related diseases this year than in the year of Bangladesh (1975).

Our newly conceived volunteer mission program is already sending agricultural helpers to help people learn how better to help themselves. Have you stopped to realize what Southern Baptists could do about world hunger if we put out a consistent effort to do so? Just one dollar a week . . . far less than a meal we might miss . . . would mean thirteen million dollars a week! That's six hundred and seventy three million dollars a year! Our Committee on Order of Business has provided an occasion for a demonstration of concern for hungry people in our world by challenging us to give the equivalent of tomorrow night's meal to world hunger. At the evening service tomorrow night that opportunity will be ours. Some of us will miss tomorrow night's meal to identify with that need and give its equivalent. Others will eat our steak and give it too. But all of us will be reminded that "inasmuch" as we have done it to the least of His brethren, we have done it unto Him. A major consultation on world hunger is being planned this fall.

### 3. *We are seeing a vision of a world of entrenched evil and opportunity.*

I've come to a new sense of excitement about Paul's statement that "Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound" (Romans 5:20). The sin which abounds in the evil entrenchments of our world seems to release the grace of God in the most intense and fantastic ways. As we look at the evil around us we are like the servant of Elisha when surrounded by the enemy. We cry, "My father, my father." Then God opens our vision to see surrounding our enemies the encircling angels of fire. He is freed to work where evil is.

And the evil is there. These brief days will see us examining the challenge of it. The concept of family is under fire as never since the first century. Not only are families being fragmented by lightly given promises and self-centered attitudes, but the very idea of commitment to marriage is under assault. Healthy sexual expression within marriage, nurturing of character within families, and discovering the family's role in missions will make up an entire session of our time together.

Television, our nation's most sophisticated teaching tool, has been preempted by the profitmakers and committed to dumping the garbage of violence and twisted sex into our living rooms. We believe the consumer has a right and role in changing that and will look at it together.

With our ears tuned to the sound of the world mission enterprise, we are hearing the cries of our persecuted brothers and sisters around the world. The systematic decimation of Christians in some African countries, the harassing and imprisonment of followers of the faith in some European countries, and the travail of some of our brethren in Asian countries places the human rights issue high on the agenda of Baptists. We have consistently cared about freedom

throughout our history. We are grieved that recently even Israel, which has long been a symbol of freedom because it was built by survivors of holocaust, has reactivated an anti-conversion law which hampers the free sharing of one's faith.

The deepest level of challenge does not lie in any of these expressions of evil. It lies in the need for spiritual awakening in our nation and our world. One entire session's emphasis together will be centered on the need for spiritual awakening in our nation and our world. One entire session's emphasis together will be centered on the need for spiritual awakening and a great prayer meeting asking God to forgive our sins and heal our land.

And encompassing it all is the vision of evangelizing and witnessing to our entire world . . . and to every world in which we move.

### III. SOME STEPS FOR ACCOMPLISHING THE VISION.

Visions without response mechanisms paralyze, frustrate, and anger us. The greatest challenge of a magnificent obsession is to develop concrete steps for accomplishing it. We have been hard at the task. We will be working at it this week and in the years to come. Some steps deal with attitude and others with actions.

#### 1. *Repent of our timidity*

Because we have gradually become the nation's largest evangelical body, we have been tempted to measure ourselves against ourselves. We have developed a strange variety of timidity . . . contrary to the image many non-Baptists have of us, our timidity has been in a strange reluctance to test God's storehouse. He promises to provide all our needs as we are in the doing of His will. In a jet and rocket age, we have set a pedestrian pace for our growth. We must repent of this kind of timidity.

I sat in a meeting of Southern Baptists in Canada recently. The three hundred or so persons in the room represented some thirty congregations. Yet, as they addressed themselves to their task, they were not talking about simply enlarging their numbers, they were talking seriously about winning Canada to Christ. The audacity was breathtaking. Two thousand congregations by this date . . . twice that by this date . . . a word from another area of the nation in which the stirring of God had created a new church becomes the "cloud the size of a man's hand" for which their Elijahs were looking and symbolized a vast downpour of the power from heaven which is on its way . . . students by the score on Canadian campuses coming to Jesus Christ . . . God is up to something among them. I left there with my heart singing. It sounded like a hundred and twenty Christians in a large room in Jerusalem centuries ago. Nations for Christ? Why not? Why not indeed?

#### 2. *Reaffirm our ecclesiology*

Our Baptist rhetoric has always said that the local church is pivotal and vital in the kingdom enterprise. However, I am increasingly concerned that our attitudes reflect our rhetoric. If we are to see this vision a reality, it will have to happen basically through the local church. We must avoid the temptation to sacrifice effectiveness for efficiency. It may be more efficient to be connectionalists and make the association or state convention or agency central in our efforts, but the slow processes of democracy in which we are congregationalists is more effective. It is in tune with the Bible's message. Jesus established the church. The only visible manifestation of it in Scripture is the local assembly. The headquarters for the Southern Baptist Convention is in the local

New Testament church. There are not great churches and little churches. There are only small ones and large ones. If Bold Missions is to be, it must happen in the churches. Here we discover our gifts and call out the called. Here we move from the base line of the tithe on to sacrificial giving. Here we meet the challenge of increasing our cooperative missions giving by fifteen per cent a year and double them within our time goals. Here we develop and debate our doctrines and reject creedalism in favor of the New Testament. Here we stay in touch with the "common people" who heard Christ gladly. We are a movement of the people. If we lose that touch, we become a cut-flower denomination, severed from our root system. The basic strategy for evangelizing this lost world is through the fellowship of the local church.

#### 3. *Reorder our priorities*

The vision demands that we reorder our priorities. We have tried to capture the phases of the vision in slogans . . . Bold Growing, Bold Going, Bold Giving. They are three points in a triangle of effort for making the vision a reality. Of course, they are not comprehensive enough. The key is boldness, but the triangle must be at least a five pointed star. Two other elements are essential whether we sloganize them or not. There must be Bold Doing to close the credibility gap of a skeptical world before they will believe our message and trust our Lord. There also must be Bold Praying for God is the author of the vision and the only hope of its fulfillment.

I have always been intrigued by the momentum factor in a football game. It moves so quickly from one to another. It makes the suspense of the game. It is especially noticeable during the final two minutes of a game. I am amazed that more ground can sometimes be gained by a team in those two minutes than in the whole half. I chatted some time ago about that two minutes of bedlam with Bill Glass who at that time was All Pro for the Cleveland Browns. His answer was that the coaches trained their men during that time when chaos reigns, crowds scream, time is running out, everything is coming loose. They are told to concentrate on the basics. No fancy experimentation, no analyses of action, no individual heroics for headlines . . . just back to the basics. Run your pattern. Block your man. Make your tackle. Shut out everything except doing your basic job.

It is bedlam time in our world. Time is running out. We need to be back to the basics. That is what the vision demands:

The basic Bold Growing. We need to neither glory in artificial growth nor excuse ourselves for lack of growth. While there are some flinty fields in which faithfulness produces growth which is not apparent and spectacular, the fact is that most of our people have never been in a church with a ten per cent growth factor every year. We don't prioritize it because we can't visualize it. Here and there we are experiencing it . . . the hem of the garment of Bold Growing. Yet it is a basic factor if we are to fulfill his command. New congregations, new units, new efforts, new attitudes . . . Bold Growing.

The basic of Bold Going. Doubling our permanent mission force in five years is Bold Going. It is also essential if we have the skeletal force of the body which the muscle and tissue of growth at home and among the nationals abroad must have to match our vision. The people are ready for the challenge to go. In addition to that, and excitingly capturing the imagination of our people is the mission service corps. Five thousand full time volunteers in the field serving, sharing, supporting in five years. I have been in services in which 500 young people in one night have committed themselves to two years in mission service as part of the strategy of their lives. A

thousand years of mission service promised to God in one night. The hem of the garment of Bold Going.

The basic of Bold Giving. None of us have managed to sacrifice for Jesus yet. He owns it all. He makes us trustees. As Carl Bates says, We've had a basic mistake in our refusal to trust the god of Malachi 3:10. Moving past the base line of the tithe to graduated tithing prepares our churches to move to double our Cooperative Program of missions in five years. Over and above that is Bold Giving in sponsoring these volunteers. Many of them are investing their own resources as well as lives. We sponsor folk who go without salary to give themselves in personalizing missions . . . in making it happen. I watched in one night a group of one hundred Southern Baptist couples decide to give over and above their tithe more than a million dollars of such mission support. The hem of the garment in Bold Giving.

The basic of Bold Doing. A cynical world will care little for our efforts to grow organizations, increase mission personnel, or give more money unless there is a closing of the credibility gap about Jesus. We must demonstrate the difference Christ makes or all our preachments are in vain. I am grateful that Southern Baptists have largely exorcised the demon of racism which crippled our mission witness for years. But many other challenges to Christian behavior remain. The greatest word about the process of sharing truth is found in Acts 1:1. "The former treatise have I made, O Theophilus, Of all that Jesus began both to do and to teach." Doing is teaching. Doing must precede teaching. Without doing, our teaching is vain.

#### 4. *Recover our spiritual vitality*

For the vision to become reality, we must recover our spiritual vitality. The refreshing of God's Spirit is the essential ingredient for any of this to impact our world. We can labor hard to have the structure and channels and resources of lives available. Unless God moves nothing happens. Like Ezekiel we can watch the bones come together, the muscle and sinew and skin come into place. But the army is dead. The cry of God is "Son of man, can these bones live?" Our response can only be with the prophet. "Only you know, Lord." It is in God's hand.

The essence . . . the basic . . . is Bold Praying. One session we will be called to such praying . . . the thousands of us here in this place . . . on our knees before God. To those too sophisticated for that kind of thing . . . or too cynical . . . or

too pragmatic . . . or too philosophical . . . so be it. Someone asks, "Are you trying to go back to the old fashioned prayer meeting of brush arbor revivalism?" My answer is . . . no. We are trying to go back farther than that . . . to the old fashioned prayer meeting of the First Century when they prayed boldly:

And the place was shaken where they were  
They prayed boldly  
And the prisoners were set free  
They prayed boldly  
And sick lives were made whole  
They prayed boldly  
And spoke the word of God with boldness  
They prayed boldly  
And Caesar's household was peopled with newly changed saints  
They prayer boldly  
And power came—compelling, transforming power

Remember we are not praying to a reluctant God. He is the Author of the vision. He yearns to bless. He can only do so as we earnestly, fervently, believingly, joyfully claim his breath to give life.

#### CONCLUSION:

There was a day when the boy was dead and the man of God didn't know it. The Shunammite woman rushed to Elisha with her heart breaking. Her boy was dead! Elisha sends his servant Gehazi with his staff and instructs him to lay it across the child. When the prophet arrives he finds out that nothing has happened. He closes them out and prays. He stretches himself on the body of the boy. He breathes on him. He walks about in agony. He repeats his praying, his stretching himself on the child. Finally, the child comes to life. He lives because the man of God has given everything he has to the process.

So with the dead in our world. Deadness cannot be affected by second hand, long distance efforts. Our staffs laid by indifferent servants across our world will make no difference. But if we give ourselves to it, if we pour ourselves out into it, if we have what Jose Ortega y Gasset calls Christianity's unique contribution to mankind . . . commitment. In our agony, praying, pleading, giving, doing, we do all He asks us to do we free Him to do all He wants to do. And resurrection comes . . . life reigns . . . the vision becomes reality. And where there is vision, the people flourish.