

✓ Buchanan, 1944

THE DEBT WE STILL OWE

Southern Baptist Convention Sermon preached in Atlanta, Georgia, May 16, 1944, by John H. Buchanan.

"I am debtor both to Greeks and to Barbarians, both to the wise and the foolish. So, as much as in me is, I am ready to preach the gospel to you also that are in Rome." Romans 1:14-15.

On December 27, 1943, when the glorious news flashed from Nashville, Tennessee, that the Southern Baptist Convention had paid the last penny of its indebtedness, a thrill of pride and joy filled all our hearts. May God grant that out of the bitter experiences which have come to us through the long, hard years of retiring these millions of dollars of indebtedness, we have learned our lesson, and hereafter will so order the fiscal policy of our Convention as to live within our income, and never again place upon the shoulders of our people a burdensome financial debt. To attain this end, we would do well to listen to the counsel of Joseph, the Patriarch, and in the years of plenty create reserves for the lean years.

While we face the hundredth anniversary of the founding of our Convention, free of all indebtedness in the realm of business obligations, it still

remains true that there rests upon us a tremendous debt - a debt that we still owe - not a material obligation, but what is far more significant, a spiritual obligation. For every one of us who names the name of Christ cannot escape the sense of obligation that filled the heart of our fellow-Christian, Paul. We, too, are compelled to say with him, "I am debtor both to Greeks and to Barbarians, both to the wise and the foolish."

Paul holds this sense of obligation as a debt that he owes, because he now realizes that "he is not his own; he has been bought with a price." He has come to see that when Jesus Christ, on that green hill outside the city wall, made once for all a sacrifice for sin, that there was involved in that sacrifice his, Paul's, own sin; that Jesus, the Son of God, on that cross died in his stead; that Christ became a curse for him. "Him who knew no sin he made to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in him."

I have the feeling that no man can ever look on that cross, and fully understand that on that tree the Son of God drank the bitter dregs of the cup of his sin, and paid the last debt that God's righteousness, God's holiness, and God's justice, demands for him, without sharing with Paul this sense of obligation.

There was another thing that impelled Paul to write, "I am debtor both to the Barbarians and to the Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish." He realized that in Christ and in the gospel that Christ had committed to him, there was the answer to every need that human

life and human experience could know. There rests upon one an ethical compulsion to share with his fellow-man anything that has enriched his own life and met his own deepest need. If in Christ one finds the abundant life, the enjoyment of that glorious discovery carries with it the inescapable, ethical obligation to share it with other men.

Paul knew that the gospel of Christ is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth. He knew that in that gospel there is the answer for every need, the remedy for every disease that has afflicted mankind; and, therefore, he has a sense of ethical compulsion that made him recognize his spiritual obligation to all men, the wise and the foolish.

We Southern Baptists rejoice, as well as <sup>we</sup> may, that we have discharged our financial obligation, as we should have done, but the fact still remains that, with Paul, we are debtors to all men.

I. WE OWE SOMETHING TO OURSELVES. Paul employs three metaphors in his letters to the Corinthians to picture the individual responsibility of the Christian;. "We are stewards of the mysteries of God." "We are ambassadors on behalf of Christ." And, "Ye are our epistles written in our hearts, known and read of all men." Stewards, ambassadors, epistles - what meaningful metaphors. A steward, according to the definition of our English dictionary, is, "a man entrusted with the household or estate of another man." The greek word

translated steward is a compound word meaning "house-  
manager."

We owe it to ourselves to be good stewards in the household of faith. To attain this goal we must bring character, wisdom, foresight and sound judgment to the administration of the program of our Lord, committed to us. "It is required of a steward that a man be found faithful." We must be trustworthy, prudent and far-seeing in this realm of our responsibility. Wisdom has fled from us if in these years of plenty we do not make provision as good stewards for the lean years that must inevitably follow. Not to create a "sinking fund," as some have said, but rather to build up reserves against the evil day. We must never forget that in the business administration of our kingdom work we operate under the same basic economic laws as secular business operates. A religious dollar contains only one hundred cents, the same as the secular dollar. We owe it to ourselves to be keenly discerning in this relationship lest we confuse presumption with faith. Failing to create reserves in these more prosperous years, inevitably there will be forced upon us one of two unhappy but inescapable results. When the evil day comes we will either be compelled to cut the work of our boards and agencies to a bare skeleton, or to encumber again our beloved denomination with burdensome and staggering debts. We

We owe it to ourselves to be good managers in the household of faith - good stewards of the kingdom of Christ.

We are also under obligations to be effective ambassadors of Christ. "An ambassador represents his sovereign personally as well as his state. He is the highest diplomatic representative that one sovereign power or state sends to another." Thus the dictionary defines this function. Dr. A. T. Robertson, in his Word Pictures of the New Testament, has said: "The ambassador has to be persona grata with both countries, the one he represents and the one to which he goes. Paul was Christ's Legate to act in his behalf and in his stead." God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself, and has committed unto us the word of reconciliation. We are ambassadors, therefore, on behalf of Christ. As my great old teacher has said, the ambassador must be acceptable to his sovereign who sends and must be acceptable to those to whom he goes.

We owe it to ourselves to grasp a full recognition of our exalted place in the divine economy. God forbid that we should misrepresent him to a lost world. We are under obligation to fit ourselves to be an acceptable ambassador for Christ. With dignity of life, integrity of character and clarity of message, we should make ourselves acceptable to those to whom we are sent as the Legate of Christ.

Again, if we are the living epistles known and read of all men, we owe it to ourselves to wear worthily the name Christian - "Christ's men." There is incumbent upon us the obligation to develop a winsome type of life that will impel men to recognize that these are they who have been with Jesus. The sense of this obligation will be deepened, when we remember that the unbelieving world about us forms its estimate of the meaning of Christianity and makes its evaluation of the worth of the religion of Jesus: not from the Bible, for they do not read it; nor from the sermons we preach, for they rarely hear they rarely hear them; but the world forms its concept and makes its evaluation of the Christian religion from what it sees in the lives of those who profess it. They are the epistles known and read of all men.

I am jealous that the people called Baptists shall develop from the truth they hold a culture and type of life and character as strong and beautiful and distinctive as the truth they preach. This truth inculcated in our hearts and lives, controlling in all of life relationships, will produce in us a culture and a character as distinctive and fine and beautiful as the truth we profess and preach. We owe it to ourselves that as living epistles we should be lovely letters which all men read.

## II. WE HAVE AN OBLIGATION TO THE WORLD ABOUT US.

We are debtors to give to our distraught, broken world the redemptive gospel that is ours. Paul was not ashamed of this gospel because it is the power of God unto

salvation to every one that believeth: to the Jew first and also to the Greek. This Blessed Book gives us our message for this tragic hour and for every hour. It is Jesus Christ in his divine personality, his sinless humanity, in his office as Prophet, Priest and King, in the atoning efficacy of his death, in the power of his resurrection, in his ceaseless intercession and in the certainty and purpose of his coming again. That is the good news we owe to all men.

In this global struggle for freedom, Baptists owe it to society to proclaim with clarity and vigor the great principles which have made us distinctive in the Christian world.

Involved in this gospel are certain great truths that this world crisis demands should be reaffirmed and declared in clarion tones. We owe it to the world about us to proclaim the absolute competency of the individual in the realm of religion. If this basic concept is ignored, this global struggle for human freedom will be in vain. From this truth stems soul-liberty, freedom of religion - all the freedoms for which men fight today.

Our forebears paid the price of bitter persecution in their fight to establish a political and social order, in which freedom of religion, in its fullest sense, would be guaranteed to every man. Our great nation had

demonstrated that there can be a free church in a free state. Freedom of worship, religious tolerance, are not enough. The liberation of all men everywhere in the world, from coercive control in the realm of religion, is the only sound basis for complete religious liberty. "Our forebears sought and fought to secure, not for themselves alone, but for all men, believers and unbelievers alike, absolute religious liberty. And in so doing they introduced into the structure of civil government the principle that uproots the source and destroys the instruments of religious persecution wherever this principle is embodied in a nation's constitution and effectively implemented by law." It cannot be gainsaid that America's chief contribution to civilization is the complete separation of Church and State. Our Baptist forefathers secured this boon at great sacrifice. We are under obligation to seek to guarantee to all men, everywhere, the fullest freedom in the realm of religion. In the language of another: "American Baptists owe it to themselves and to mankind to be the protagonists of religious freedom, which legally enforced throughout the world will end religious persecution of every kind, and will liberate all men everywhere to choose those by whom they shall be governed."

Again I say that, in this global struggle for freedom, we owe it to the whole world to proclaim the

competency of the individual in the realm of religion. If we have evolved for ourselves in America a political economy, a social order, where the fullest measure of freedom is enjoyed, where this precious heritage of soul-liberty is distinctive; then it follows, as the night follows the day, that there rests upon us the inescapable ethical obligation to share with every other man, regardless of color, or race, or station on this earth this glorious heritage. No man can inherit the spirit of Jesus; no man can share the ethical outlook of Paul and be an isolationist. In such a day as this, whatever of good we have evolved in our political economy, whatever of well-being the Christian ethic has produced in our nation, we are under an ethical compulsion, a spiritual obligation to share it with all men.

Seeking as a Christian nation to discharge our debt to the world in which we live, we shall better be able to do this through a pattern of co-operation rather than through a pattern of international union. In the creation of a world organization for the peace and betterment of mankind; it will be wiser and safer to respect the autonomy of each participating nation, rather than in the formulation of a Super-state with sovereign power. For history reveals that the principle of coercion and compulsion is never as strong and effective as the principle of cooperation.

Seeking as a member of the family of Christ to establish his kingdom on earth, we, as Baptists, in the spirit of co-operation can catch hands with every other friend of Christ on this globe, and take to all mankind this gospel that has brought to us our blessed way of life. We Baptists believe the very genus of our faith, and we betray the ethical outlook of our forebears when we choose for ourselves in such a time as this a path of ecclesiastical isolation.

III. A DEBT WE OWE TO CHRIST. Pressed with the sense of this obligation to Christ, Paul reached the place where he cried, "It is no longer I that live, but Christ liveth in me." He felt, and we should feel, that his mind should become our mind, that his spirit should become our spirit. If we discharge this debt to Christ, we must not only believe in Christ, but we must believe with Christ. Unless my concepts, my standards, my evaluations are his concepts, his standards, his evaluations, I have not truly become his. When we think of faith in the terms of his faith, we are led immediately to a re-examination of our faith in terms of his faith. His idea of forgiveness is far removed from our idea of forgiveness. If I discharge my obligation to Christ, I will take him seriously when he says to me, "Love your enemies and pray for them that persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father who is in

Heaven." When we believe with Jesus, we will hold his idea of greatness, namely; "He that is greatest among you shall be your servant." You and I are debtors with Paul, "To have this mind in us which was also in Christ Jesus." When we measure our thought by the mind of Christ, we are prone to cry with H. G. Wells, "The Galilean is too great for us." But this is not true if we trust him to make new our mind just as we have trusted him to make alive our hearts. He who warmed our hearts with an indescribable love can quicken our minds with an immeasurable wisdom. We are debtor to Christ to reincarnate his mind and his spirit in our personality.

With the clarion call of a world that has lost its way ringing in our ears, we Southern Baptists launch our second century of glorious history. Keenly aware of our debt to ourselves, our debt to the world about us, and , above all, our debt to the Christ who has redeemed us, may there be regnant in our hearts this same sense of obligation that will impel us to cry with Paul, "I am debtor to all men." And may we sing again with discernment and consecration that great old hymn, which our fathers sang:

A charge to keep I have,  
A God to glorify,  
Who gave His son my soul to save,  
And fit it for the sky.

To serve the present age,  
My calling to fulfill,  
O may it all my pow'rs engage  
To do my Master's Will.

Arm me with jealous care,  
As in Thy sight to live,  
And, O, Thy servant, Lord, prepare,  
A strict account to give.