

J. W. Starnes, 1946

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CHRIST'S CLAMANT CALL

- Acts 1:8

The limb of a tree grows to its foreordained shape in response to forces limited by nature, but the affairs of a denomination are shaped by the actions of men and the leadership of the Holy Spirit, and looking back historians may determine what actions were decisive.

One hundred years ago the nation faced a momentous decision. James Knox Polk, North Carolina born, but a citizen of Tennessee, had taken his seat as the 11th President of the United States, having won the election over Henry Clay because of his unequivocal stand for the immediate annexation of Texas and the adoption of a vigorous policy concerning Oregon. Our Convention was born not only in a time when wise men saw the dread clouds beginning to form which would within 15 short years hide in somber darkness the sun of peace; it was also born in a time of national expansion. The minds of men were filled with dreams of empire and the advancing lines of civilization, (United States version) which should move beyond the rivers, deserts, mountains and forests until the vast Pacific would be linked with the Atlantic beneath the Eagle's widespread wings.

There is a classic story of a hundred years ago, told by a great political figure on the Tennessee hustings in the 1844 election. Early in that year a party of traders returning from Santa Fe had been overtaken by a sudden thunderstorm. When it had passed, the red sun had sunk low on the prairie's rim, and the traders cried out with a loud voice, for the image of an eagle was spread across the sun! Thus the portent of the eagle of liberty, beneath whose broad pinions vast territories then within the empire of Mexico, should find a hospitable rest.

Incidentally, the most ardent of these dreamers, as indeed the most vocal of its present day exponents, could not have improved upon these words of Henry Thoreau - he of Walden, and life in the woods. Said he, "When I go out of the house, and go for a walk, uncertain as yet whither I will bend my steps, and submit myself to my instinct to decide for me,

I find, strange and whimsical as it may seem, that I finally and inevitably settle south west. My needle is slow to settle, varies a few degrees, and does not always point due southwest, it is true, and it has good authority for this variation, but it always settles between west and west southwest. The future lies that way, and the earth seems more un-exhausted on that side. I should not lay so much stress on this fact, if I did not believe that something like this is the prevailing tendency of my countrymen." So said Thoreau - but could the Chamber of Commerce of Tulsa have stated it more neatly and with such charming simplicity?

Yes, expansion was the atmosphere which the men of 100 years ago breathed, and mingled with that, the acrid tang of civil strife. It was as tho the wind of destiny bore on its unseen wings the bitter smell of the burning ruins of a proud and sometime haughty land, and at the same time fanned the cheeks of those who frantically sought to plow a clean land on which no fuel for future fire could be found. Into this confused and chaotic national arena moved the little band of men who formed, 100 years ago in Augusta, the Southern Baptist Convention. Here were men not actuated by the dream of any empire other than that of Christ's; here were men to whom "manifest destiny" was the obedient carrying out of the Great Commission, and whose concern was that all men everywhere should come to know Him whom to know aright is life eternal.

They too were moved by the spirit of conquest - but not a conquest of leagues of land nor the rule of a clinched fist. They envisaged the followers of Christ, members of the churches in the states of the South, going not only into the "south southwest," but beyond the oceans' rim, to the far off lands fringed by the seven seas. They founded a society of co-operating believers who were to go into all the world and take possession of it in the name of Christ. They had no pillar of fire by night nor cloud by day to lead them - they needed not those Mosaics, for the path before them had been traced by His blessed hand, and they were cheered by the clarion call, "All power is given unto me in heaven

and earth x x x x and lo! I am with you always even unto the end." How tawdry was the political slogan, "Manifest destiny," compared to that high word of prophecy, "The dominion of the greatness of the kingdom, under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High?" It is the glory of the Southern Baptist Convention, that the design of its organization is, in the name of God, and by the force of His resistless Word, to take possession of the whole world, beginning at Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the uttermost parts of the earth. He that is able to save to the uttermost has called for the conquest of the uttermost, and it was this that motivated the birth of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Glorious as has been the history of these 100 years, I am concerned today, not so much with the honored past as I am with the way we enact the history of today and the foundation we lay for the history of tomorrow. I ask of you, my brethren, as I ask of myself, facing this confused and distressful hour in the world's sad history of degenerate disobedience to its Maker:

"What hath THIS day deserved? What hath IT done, that IT in golden letters should be set among the high tides in the calendar?"

From that determined and destined group, meeting in Augusta in 1845, we have grown to be a mighty host of nearly five and three quarter millions. But numbers count for little unless well organized to do something worthwhile.

It would be wise for us as a Convention to ponder the conversation between the children of Joseph, and Joshua, as found in Joshua 17:14-15. "And the children of Joseph spake unto Joshua saying, 'Why hast thou given me but one lot, and one part for an inheritance, seeing I am a great people, forasmuch as hitherto Jehovah hath blessed me?' And Joshua said unto them, 'If thou be a great people, get thee up to the forest and cut down for thyself there in the land of the Perizzites and of the Rephaim, since the hill country is too narrow for thee.'"

That is, in effect, "You say you are great? Well, prove it!"

We are a great people, we Southern Baptists - we concede it! And we are not given to over much modesty in such admittance to the self-implication of superiority! But greatness comes not by boasting, greatness comes by doing, - and when we compare the little we have done with the much we should have done, God knows we ought to lay our hands upon our lips.

The worth of this Convention as a missionary force is measured by the degree in which it is possessed by the spirit of Christ. Too often its historic aspect has been regarded as the result of purely natural processes, similar to those which have produced national characteristics, and the Holy Spirit appears to be the forgotten factor. In our own day, when the scientific spirit is peering into the mysteries of the unseen as never before, and it must be confessed, arousing furies surpassing the frenzied dwellers of Pandora's box, we do well to refresh our souls with the divine reassurance that God is with His people now as He was 1900 years ago, in so far as their obedience will permit.

And, furthermore, it would be the part of wisdom never to forget that the Holy Spirit is the immanent administrative energy of the God-head in the affairs of the New Testament churches and of our Convention. The Holy Spirit is not to be conceived of as a blind impersonal force, but as a definite, intelligent personality, whose functions are not only the conviction of sin, and the illumination, inspiration, regeneration, and sanctification of individuals but also the immediate direction, disposition and development of our churches according to the definite purposes of God. That ought to be kept definitely in mind by those to whom the churches have delegated authority and entrusted with the leadership of our Convention.

Ours is a growing and complex problem, as we seek to correlate the many churches and state conventions thru a relationship with each other in a comprehensive all-embracing

whole. We have time-honored Boards and Agencies with large fiduciary responsibilities, thru which we seek to obey the call of our Lord in the Great Commission, and for which our prayers and our consideration should be daily given. But primacy of existence does not merit priority of consideration beyond recognized necessity.

The scope of our work has greatly broadened in the years since the close of World War I, for we have taken on new forms of activity, have gathered under our sheltering wings, a great brood of objects, some of them but recently out of the shell, and for which we have assumed responsibility.

To articulate our work, to relate the labors of these varied Boards and Agencies to each other and to the churches, is a monumental task, and must be done with due consideration for each component part. As a denomination, as a Convention, we have no ecclesiastical head, no superman, or group of super-men to assume such headship. Unity of action, without centralization of power is our problem, and this can come only by the Holy Spirit's guidance.

And it is to our honor and for His glory, that in our dark hours, when we were humbled to the point of dependence on Him, He led us forth into larger worlds of service. For myself, I feel that we are ready now to launch out in this new century of Southern Baptist Convention history with a new devotion to our mission. To quote Grist, "In the development of an organism, stages are reached when a higher principle of life reacts upon the accumulated results of previous processes, thereby lifting the creature to a higher plane, whence may be unfolded new potentialities." We have now come to such a stage!

And if, despite the realization of that fact, we refuse to take up the armor of faith and go forth conquering and to conquer, but instead lay down the sword of the Spirit to pick up tools and tinker with machinery, then have we indeed sinned away our day of grace and opportunity. To be sure, should weaknesses develop in our Convention make-up and

methods, these should, without delay, be remedied, but how often have we by bickering and littleness, grieved the Holy Spirit - how often have we, concerned with certain segments of service and shibboleths of theology, been blinded to the dying world about us, nor heard His word; "Why call ye me Lord, Lord, and do not the things I commanded?"

To our shame, we have so often spent our time speculating on what shade of paint is most desirable for the car, ignoring the fact that the battery is dead and no spark of fire gives life and motive power! It is not strange then, that someone has cynically defined a convention as composed of people who can do nothing alone, but who meeting together, decide that nothing can be done.

This is no day for littleness, for scheming, for promoting of one part against another; this is a giant day and must be met by humble, sincere men in the power of the Holy Spirit, only thus shall we have a worthy part in the struggle of the ages. We must have in us the mind of Christ, and thus only will we be able to have a vision of things in their proper proportions and true perspectives.

There is a danger of diffusion and dissipation of energy. Wisdom is mightily needed, wisdom which is from above, to distinguish between that which is of God, and that which is of man. Christianity properly concerns itself with whatever makes for the betterment of human affairs, but it should not be made a tail to every rising kite with its aerial antics and its zigzag course.

Robert Louis Stevenson once wrote a parable with the title, "The Four Reformers," and sometimes when I hear addresses on the "social revolution," it comes sadly to my tired brain.

"The four reformers met under a bramble bush, and all agreed that the world must be changed.

'We must abolish property,' said one.

'We must abolish marriage,' said another.

'We must abolish God,' said a third.

'We must abolish work,' said the fourth.

'Do not let us get beyond practical politics,' said the first, 'let us reduce man to a common level.'

'The first thing,' said the second, 'is to give freedom to the sexes.'

The third said, 'we must find out how to do it.'

'The first step,' said the second, 'is to abolish the Bible.'

'The second step,' said the third, 'is to abolish the laws.'

'The third step,' said the fourth, 'is to abolish mankind!'"

I submit that any philosophy of life, other than Christ's, will inevitably arrive at that futile conclusion!

The crowning glory of the churches from which our Convention draws its sustenance, has always been their fervent evangelistic spirit, the exalting of Christ's redemptive work, and the Spirit's renewing work within them. This, in a word sums up our mission, our reason for existence.

To a fresh allegiance and an all out obedience to the continuance of that mission, let us all be summoned today. Opportunities and demands are bewildering. A new world is emerging, industrially, socially, and politically, a revolution as radical as the world has ever known. Let us not delude ourselves with a nostalgic yearning for the normalcy of yester years. The very stars in their courses are fighting for the new order - suddenly the whole face of things has changed and we stand aghast before a broken world, filled with incalculable peril, but one of God given opportunity.

What shall be our response? It is my conviction that we should without further hesitation take up the duty enjoined upon us by our text and obey to the last full measure of our devotion, that command to witness of Him who alone has the power to turn men from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive remission of sins and an inheritance among them that are sanctified by faith in Christ.

I look thru the pages of the Acts - it is one long recital of witnessing - before soldiers; to a lustful king and queen; to a kneeling beggar; to Jew and Gentile; at Rome in chains; everywhere, anywhere, it is a record of witnessing, witnessing, witnessing! What are the Epistles? Logical portrayals of the witnessing! To what do they witness - these men who have hazarded their lives for the love they bore to Christ? In one word - to the redemptive power of the Son of God. There was never a doubt about that power, never a trace of the atheism of despair, no gospel of futilitarianism produced these men. And it was a personal, and a passionate witness.

They bore witness that, if any man sin, he has an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and that He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.

It is a great thing to have the inspiration of a worthy cause, and such we have, not, to be sure, in the sense of custodians, but as trustees.

We have what the world needs, and we have the assurance of power to deliver that necessity. Our first witness is to spiritual realities; our second witness is thru our lives to the redemptive power of God, (for how can men be persuaded that Christ can do anything for them, if they can see it is doing nothing for us?); and our third witness is thru sacrificial service. For we are in the world to authenticate His gospel, and demonstrate His power. Such a conception involves the adoption as a working principle, of the willingness to die that others might live. What this means, the most of us have never accepted. Carlyle's sardonic epitaph for a parson of his day, is dangerously near the truth for ours, "Soul dead, stomach well alive."

When I observe the zeal of Communistic propogandists I am amazed at the lengths to which they will go - BECAUSE THEY ARE CONSUMED WITH A PASSION!

Would that we might learn a lesson from the children of darkness!

Behold the wonders of the lips unsealed! Personal witnessing, that was the secret of a world turned upside down, and therefore right side up.

Oh that the passion of personal witnessing should again fall upon us, so that when we shall be scattered abroad, it will be to testify of Him. How shall that passion come to be? For myself, I know of but one way:

Let me see Him, and the five bleeding wounds He bears, received on Calvary! Let me see Him, as up from the grave He arose, with a mighty triumph o'er His foes!

Let me see Him as Stephen saw Him, standing at the right hand of the Throne of God! Let me see Him as Paul saw Him, in the power of His resurrection, the fellowship of His sufferings, and being made conformable to His death!

Let me see Him as John saw Him, worthy to open the seals, and lead captivity captive, before whose face the heavens flee away!

Let me see Him, as I a lost sinner, find in His imputed righteousness my only hope - all other ground but sinking sand!

Let me see Him thus - and then I shall witness - not with the apathy of a worldling, but with the very love of Christ constraining me!

The lack of this explains our present weakness and furnishes the soil from whence comes our crop of denominational passivity.

Yes, here, born in sheer neglect, is found our present weakness, but in full compliance to Christ's clamant call will be found our potential power.

What think you of the unmeasured might of 5,500,000 Southern Baptists, energized by the Holy Spirit as they witness to the saving grace of Christ?

They tell me of the country church problem - it will exist no longer when Southern Baptists become a witnessing people.

They tell me the city cannot be won for Jesus. I ride thru the misery, vice, and filth of the slums. I note the stamp of sin and shame; tired, ignorant, dirty mothers; and sickly, suffering, undernourished children with never a taste of decent surroundings. Hard by, I see indifference, sham, and mad catering to sensation upon the part of the rich.

I see upon convenient corners here and there, costly piles of stone, surmounted by a cross - but with doors tight closed amidst the wild riot of the week.

I see churches moving away from the teeming tide of unkempt and embittered humanity - the Cross retreating to the shelter of quietude and correctness! All this I see, and then I remember it was in a city that Pentecost and power became synonymous. And it was in a city - Ephesus, Corinth, Rome - it was in a city that Paul went boldly witnessing nor feared its crowds or crime.

If, with the abandon of Paul, if, seized by the spirit of the Christ's command, Southern Baptists will go out to witness for Him as our God will open doors, it will be said of us too, as it was said of them, "these are they that have turned the world upside down."

Ichabod is our name, if we have become so enthralled by machinery, so reliant upon Boards and budgets, so attuned to the lure of lucre and the campaigns of craft, that we have lost our devotion to Christ and the dependence upon the Holy Spirit which empowers us for witnessing.

"While mighty earthquakes rock the world's foundation,  
And chaos threatens empires and their lords,  
While men of strength lie stricken in the wreckage,  
And men of wisdom cease their utterings,  
While darkness menaces man's puny striving,  
And new-born terror haunts the land and sea,

Still walks our Christ along the lakeside,

And calls to His disciples, "Witness thou to Me!"

Who can deny the success of that New Testament church which became churches with such rapidity?

And despite the power arrayed against them, who dared with supreme audacity to believe that success could ever rest upon the banner of the Cross?

Those who obeyed, did!

Let us too, confessing and facing the obstacles, win as did they; knowing that the Christ above and the world below waits today for a church that witnesses, and that as Hudson Taylor said, "Christ cannot be Lord at all, unless He be Lord of all."

And what supernal joy there is in this obedience.

Yonder in China, hundreds of miles from any touch with the outside world, lived John and Mary Gaston, so Dr. McCune tells us. Fruitful was their work and blessed of the Lord were they.

Then Mary became ill, desperately so, and John started with his beloved down the river, hoping to reach a physician before it was too late. As comfortably as he could make her, under a canopy to keep off the hot July sun, they hurried, aided by oars and river current.

One day near noon, they approached a large tree alongside the river bank and Mary said, "John, I am so tired, I would like to go up yonder under that great tree."

Tying the boat to the bank, he carried the frail form ashore and laid her gently down beneath the wide and beneficent shade of the tree.

After a moment, when her strength had returned from the mystic region of its wandering, she spoke gently to him - "John, I am not going any farther with you, I am going to be with Jesus. But I'm glad we came to China - we have a host who know Jesus today - it was good that we came." She named many who knew Jesus because they had come, and spoke of the transformation in certain villages.

Then John looked down toward the river, but there were no Chinese there, for they knew death was come, and they had gone over the hill, and he was alone.

With an oar he dug the grave, took some boughs from the tree, and spread them down as if for a coffin, took the white shirt and formed of it a shroud. Then he lifted the body of that fellow soldier of his, and placed it in the grave, covered it with the boughs, and knelt beside it.

After an endless hour of agony, he left it - to wait the moment when in His own good way, and His own good time, our Lord should gather those who sleep in Jesus, unto Himself.

Then John called the Chinese, and went down to the boat. But when they would have resumed their journey down the river, John stopped them and said, "Up the river, UP the river, UP THE RIVER FOR GOD!"

Because, the last whispered word of Mary's had been, "John, I wish you would go back up the river and witness for God, till Jesus comes for you as He has for me!" And so he did!

"Our fathers to their graves have gone,  
Their strife is past, their triumph won;  
But sterner trials wait the race  
That rises in their honored place,  
A moral warfare with the crime  
And folly of an evil time.

.So let it be! In God's own might,  
We gird us for the coming flight,  
And strong in Him whose cause is ours,  
In conflict with unholy powers,  
We grasp the weapons He has given,  
The Light and Truth and Love of Heaven."

And if we grow weary, remember that they who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with eagle's wings, they shall run, and not be weary, they shall walk, and not faint.

I once heard Stuart Holden say that in the taking of a photograph it is but the hundredth part of a second for the image to be imprinted upon the sensitized plate. And you say it is done - the photograph is taken. But we all know that there are many other processes to be carried thru before that photograph is perfect. There is the dark room, and there are the acid baths, and there are the frequent washings, all of which are necessary for the development of that which is imprinted in one moment.

Likewise, it is possible for each of us to be born again into right relationship with our Lord, but henceforth the growth in His likeness must be continued, it may be in the dark room of adversity, it may be in the acid-bath providences of life which at the time of their experience are inexplicable to us, but the whole process is in the hands of God.

Looking back over the past 100 years of our Convention, the analogy is clear and obvious.

But it has all been directed toward making us worthy and usable as His witnesses. This is our high calling, this is the CLAMANT CALL OF CHRIST. To that call let us respond,

and laying all at the feet of Him who loved us and gave Himself for us, give to Him the throne of our lives that in us He may live and move and have His being, thus to make us His true witnesses to all mankind!

(Sermon delivered at Southern Baptist Convention, 1946, in Miami, Florida, by Dr. J. W. Storer, Pastor of First Baptist Church, Tulsa, Oklahoma.)