

Convention Sermon by Carl E. Bates  
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"Trouble Makers in a Troubled World"

Text: Acts 17:6, "And when they found them not, they drew Jason and certain brethren unto the rulers of the city, crying, These that have turned the world upside down are come hither also."

This generation is not without its trouble makers, but it is as one of our own number has said, "The only dynamic of our time seems to be the dynamic of anti-Christ." No one can successfully deny the fact that the leading dynamic of this hour is atheistic, both in philosophy and in ethical expression. So far, we have found no way to ignore its constant pressure in every area of life and in almost every spot on the face of the earth.

There are other trouble makers. In some sections of our own country, we are keenly aware of those we call "agitators," and it is very likely that our minds turn to them when we begin to think of trouble makers. It is not at all unlikely that some few of us will turn our minds toward those who have made trouble for us in our churches.

Let me ask you a question. Why did you not immediately think of the people of God in this role? There was a day when the vitality of the Christian movement was such as to bring constant pressure to bear upon every area of man's existence and in every section of the known world, They bore their witness against severe and dangerous opposition; they sang their songs and said their prayers and rejoiced in the glad consciousness that they were counted worthy to be included in the

the movement of God which was destined to revolutionize the life of the whole world. When pagans spoke of them, they called them, "upsetters." When heads of government referred to them, they called them, "trouble makers." Their impact in their world was such as to be ridiculously out of proportion to their number. Dr. Carver said that this statement here in the book of Acts, might be considered "an exaggerated compliment." Be that as it may, they were the ones in their century who "day by day and from house to house in every city" kept the pressure on the world and refused to be shunted off the main thoroughfares of life into quiet corners to squeak out feeble protests to their hearts' content.

We are pretty tame by comparison. To be sure, we can point to a nation which is largely committed to the churches, and our countless new buildings and spiraling budgets offer further proof that we have not lost our drive. But what about this description found in our text? I simply cannot believe that any one of us is convinced tonight that the professing church of our time can by any stretch of the imagination be labeled, "trouble makers." I do not know about you, but it disturbs me that we have failed to effect a more radical transformation of the human scene.

There is no end of trouble. The masses are in revolt all over the world. They surge forward under a new passion for reality. Men are now deciding what are the real values one ought to die for in order to maintain them in our world. The traditional political, social, and religious life of our world melted down in the bomb that fell on Hiroshima, and world civilization suddenly became plastic. It waits today to receive and retain impression from the forces that make for history.

In the midst of troubled times, I am not about to point to the dynamic of anti-Christ and suggest that we emulate him and his followers. These who represent him are not the ones to who we should look for inspiration. In the race to capture the minds and hearts of the world's people, these are motivated by a diseased lust for numbers. We must somehow recapture the dynamic of those of the first century who kept the world under the constant pressure of conviction for sin and literally turned the world upside down. I say, we must recapture that dynamic, no matter what the cost.

What are the characteristics of that early group of Christians? There are many one might suggest; here are several. First,

#### A CONVICTION ABOUT THEIR LORD, JESUS CHRIST

Wherever one turns in the New Testament, he is overwhelmed by their uncompromising conviction concerning the Person and work of Jesus Christ. One hears them say, "There is no other name under heaven among men whereby you must be saved." His resurrection was preached, but back of it was His atoning death for sin. The only solidarity of the race they knew about was its solidarity in sin. Sin was the source of trouble in God's world. It was sin which reared its ugly head preceding Eden's Garden and eventually left its stain from atoms to galaxies. Men were hopelessly and eternally lost in sin and, unless somehow a new stock of heredity could be implanted in the human heart, man was doomed to come finally under its damning influence, to join those who would crucify the Son of God.

This was the gospel they preached: "Christ died for our sins, according to the scriptures."

But more than this, they saw in this cross the heart of God revealed in acceptance of responsibility for the possibility of sin's existence in the world in the first place. They believed that it was through this cross and its atoning grace that man might find this inherited disposition of evil dealt with. Wherever they went, they proclaimed "deliverance to the captives" as the good news of the gospel. It was through this cross that a man might be free.

Furthermore, this conviction about the cross concerned not only a message, but a method of living. It was no surprise to them to find God putting His sons where He put His Son. They heard from His own lips a careful and precise delineation of the cost of discipleship. "If any man would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." No man who joined them could hope to escape the necessity of taking upon himself a cross as the result of his personal self-denial.

They were certainly convicted as to the adequacy and relevance of the gospel.

Someone said recently that the difference in preachers might be illustrated from the manner in which the message is given. The rabbi stands and says, "Thus saith the Lord." The Catholic priest stands and says, "Thus saith the church." The Protestant preacher stands up and says, "Brethren, it seems to me." And I submit to you that this is poor tribute to pay to the impact of scientism, astronomy, textual criticism, and all the other technical achievements of our time. The message of the cross is neither obsolete nor hopelessly out-of-date nor incongruous in this twentieth century, and if we expect to trouble anything or anybody, we had better find our conviction again concerning its saving power.

## A WORKABLE STRATEGY

There was a second characteristic of this troublesome church in a troubled age. They had a workable strategy based upon a consuming sense of personal mission in their world. I share the opinion, held by many, that we have lost our way in missions. I offer no criticism of these dedicated servants who make such tremendous sacrifice in order to serve under our mission board. Any such thoughtless criticism would constitute an evasion of the real issue. The problem is more serious than this. There is every likelihood that the early Christians made the same mistake we have made by misinterpreting our Lord's command to "begin at Jerusalem." They settled down there and built a big church and only moved out when sore trouble moved upon them.

They discovered, as we must discover, that when Jesus said, "Begin at Jerusalem," he did not necessarily mean that we were to begin at home. For Him, Jerusalem was the place where the will of God would be accomplished in His life. Again and again, in the records which tell of His dedication, we hear Him saying, "I must go up to Jerusalem." These writers say of Him, "He set His face steadfastly toward Jerusalem," and here it was, as the lamb slain from before the foundation of the world. He fulfilled the eternal purpose of Jehovah God. So, for us as for Him, the place to begin is wherever God's will shall be accomplished in and through our life. So must of our sense of mission is impersonal and institutional and provincial. It is commendable to support the church and its mission outreach through its budget, but one may do this all of his life and miss completely the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. If my salvation lays upon me

no sense of personal mission in the world, it is less than Biblical. To be or not to be a missionary is not the question for a believer in Christ. One must go, personally, or deny the heart and genius of the Christian faith. For some of us, the realization that we must somehow "go up to Jerusalem" rests upon us like a dark cloud that overshadows everything we do. We are restless and uneasy and dissatisfied with doing "church work." We preachers are not the only ones caught up in this uneasiness. The laymen, too, have a sneaking suspicion that the kingdom of God is more than ushering on Sunday and serving on some standing committee throughout the year. Incidentally, I believe this is why we have had a rash of articles on "Why I Quit the Ministry" and why there is a never-ending procession of moving vans crisscrossing our nation, hauling the precious belongings of another preacher on the move. We are on our way to everywhere else in the world except that Jerusalem where the supreme commitment to the will of God must be made, and we are doomed to endless frustration until we come to such commitment. Unless we begin there, we make no true beginning and we shall come to no worthy end.

On this basis, when our seminary graduating classes receive their diplomas, we should not ask, "Who feels called to go?" Rather the question should be, "Are there one or two in this class who feel definitely called of God to stay in the homeland?" The only person excused from going is that person who has a definite call to stay. If we understood that all of us are to live under an overwhelming sense of mission, how many of us would knock next week on the door of the home and foreign mission boards of our Convention? How many who now teach school; how

many who now serve on church staffs; how many who now know only the frustrating uneasiness of an uncommitted life would find it necessary to rearrange their entire affairs and be on their way in full commitment to the will of Christ, if not in some foreign land, then in an area of need in our own land.

During my college days, a favorite verse among the BSU'ers was Luke 9:23. I was a new Christian, coming out of a background of skepticism. I suppose I listened to them in a critical, unsympathetic way, but when they stood and told what they had given up to become Christians, I thought deep within me, "They are as proud as hell itself." For, you see, so far as I am concerned, they had missed the total meaning of Christian discipleship. Jesus said, "If any man would come after me, let him deny his right to himself and take up day by day the cross that is involved in this kind of commitment and follow me." That's it, my brethren. One must give up his right to self altogether. "You are not your own, for you have been bought with a price." Your life isn't yours to give, your ministry isn't yours to give, your talent isn't yours to dedicate or to dissipate wherever you choose. If such commitment as this ever comes among us not only would moving vans rumble back and forth across this nation, but the ships and planes which now carry mere tourists to the far-flung places of earth would be jammed with believers in Christ on their way to some Jerusalem, where His will would be accomplished in their lives. Are you there tonight? Clergy and laity alike are still under the commission to "Begin at some Jerusalem." And whether it is at the ends of the earth or in your own hometown, we need to prepare ourselves to engage in the perilous business of challenging the sinful motives and methods and values of secular structures and redeeming them for our God and His Christ.

## AN ADEQUATE SUPPORT

Another characteristic of these trouble makers of long ago was their sense of trusteeship. So far as I have been able to find, there was no quibbling about God's ownership and their trusteeship. They had long since accepted the fact that, "That tithe is honly unto the Lord." It mattered not who held title to property or money, whether Jew or Gentile, saint or sinner, the tithe was hold and all else beside belonged to God.

Such conviction was consonant with their belief concerning sin. Sin was not so much an act, but an attitude , and, in its beginning, was (and is) rebellion against trusteeship. The Genesis story of the garden is all about this. Man put his rebellious hands on the separated portion in the garden of Eden, and God threw him out. He was to have control over everything except himself, and he would acknowledge God's ownership and his trusteeship by faithful fulfillment of God's commands, and, until one has been redeemed from whatever it is within him that causes him to rebel against the idea of God's ownership and his trusteeship, he has not been redeemed.

I believe that there is a vital relationship between stewardship and revival. We shall never understand the vitality of this early group of believers until we see this. One gets some glimpse of it in our own experience as Southern Baptists. The fact that Dr. Louie Newton led us to adopte the slogan, "Every Baptist a Tither," around 1950, has a direct connection, in my judgment, with the mighty manifestations of God's Spirit upon us during the decade just closed. Now we are saying, "The fires of revival have died, and only here and there does one find



Holy Ghost conviction for sin." This entire problem is tied up with our stewardship. Eternal life is a situation in which God entrusts power to his children and trains them for an eternal inheritance by teaching them to be good stewards. Did not our Lord say, "If you have not been faithful in that which is another's (money), who will trust to you the true riches (spiritual power)?" One of the lowest forms of power is money; the highest form of power is the power of the Holy Spirit. If we do not lead our people to be faithful in the use of "that which is another's," we cannot expect God to give us a special anointing of His power and we shall become as helpless and as powerless as the priests of Baal on Carmel. Revival is not coming in the Southern Baptist Convention; revival is not coming in our nation; revival is not coming in this world until we accept God's plan for supporting His work. I do not see any way to produce conviction on this matter as long as we lead our people to adopt budgets which represent less than fifty percent of God's holy tithe, and then lead them in singing the doxology when they do so. I tell you, we have not gotten away with this, and if we do not repent, there awaits us a captivity such as Israel never dreamed of.

#### AN ENDLESS SOURCE OF SUPPLY

We have said already that the impact made on the first century by these early Christians was ridiculously out of proportion to their numbers. In spite of this, however, we see them marching directly into the camp of the enemy, trembling before no single foe, shrinking before no task, and counting no cost too great to pay. They claimed no credit, and when comment was made about it, they gave credit where credit was due, saying, rather, "This is the Lord's doing, and it is

wondrous in our eyes." We have noted in this year of our Lord that Southern Baptists have passed the ten million mark in membership. Nobody can deny that our methods are successful that our people are accepted, or that our potential is terrific; neither can we deny how pathetically ineffective we are by comparison with New Testament Christians. So far as I know, the world no longer trembles when it thinks of us. We may be despised here and there and held in contempt by some, but I wonder if "Hell's foundations will quiver" because of what we have met here to do this week.

Most of the preachers who hear me speak have a copy of James Stewart's *The Gates of New Life*, (a most helpful book), but I wonder if we have heard him when he says: "It is power that our religion lacks today: not organization, not intellectual equipment, not social idealism--but power. And there is no secret of power except in a deepened spiritual experience."

It is ironic that we live in the greatest era of power in the history of man, and yet in certain respects we are as helpless as babies before these towering forces that make for history in our world. Surely, our most desperate need is to lay hold of the power God has promised to those who set themselves in the earth to do His work.

Somewhere along the banks of the Mississippi River, one may find the rotting remains of a fisherman's house boat. Long years ago, he floated down this stream at flood tide and anchored his boat at the top of the levy. In his preoccupation with other things, he forgot his boats, and when he returned, the river had receded, leaving him stranded. High and dry, there he sat for

for long weeks and months, waiting for the tide to rise again. If it had come, his boat wouldn't have floated. The caulking had rotted and the boards were now twisted, and he was out of business. You and I know that the father of waters will give houseboat rights to any fisherman between Lake Itasca, where the Mississippi River rises, and the Gulf of Mexico, where it empties its mighty burden. There is, however, just one requirement. He must keep his boat in touech with the stream.

We stand again on the watershed as a denomination, and it is up to you to determine the way we shall go.