

"The Unpaid Debt of Southern Baptists"  
Text: Romans 1:14-16

INTRODUCTION

When financial income is at an all time high, it may seem out of place to call attention of Southern Baptist to unpaid debts. In speaking to a group of students on one occasion, a college president is reported to have given a warning on unwise budget planning and the accumulation of personal debts. He said, "If your out go exceeds your income then your over head will be your down fall." Although there is much wisdom in this brief statement, the text found in Romans I indicates the debt referred to in this message is of a far different nature.

I. THE NATURE OF THE DEBT

When the apostle Paul said "I am debtor both to the Greeks and the barbarians, both to the wise and the unwise," he might have been giving one of the most concise and accurate definitions of stewardship anywhere to be found. He was expressing a sacred and inescapable obligation which had occurred on the road to Damascus. He had an encounter with Jesus Christ which had completely revolutionized his life. This experience had caused him to know firsthand that the gospel was "the power of God unto salvation." It had worked for him and for everyone else who had given Christ a chance in their lives. He knew it would work - he was not ashamed of it - it had never failed - he had never had to be embarrassed to recommend it to lost sinners. Without hesitation he could say in answer to the query of the Philippian jailer "believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved." Paul didn't need to worry about God's being dead because he was spiritually alive himself and was in

constant touch with the power of God as it transformed the lives of sinners.

As born again children of God who are fortunate enough to be members of Southern Baptist churches, we are not just stewards of material possessions or time or talent. We are stewards of a wonderful, glorious experience that came to us through a personal encounter with Jesus Christ who saved us and transformed our lives. We have an obligation to share this experience with a lost world.

Statements of our Lord such as "ye are to be witnesses unto me," "go ye" and "as the father hath sent me even so sent I you" serve to remind us that this debt is of a "divinely spiritual" nature and that "every man must render an account of his life unto God," in the light of how seriously we acknowledge this debt. When Lyman Beecher was on his deathbed someone asked, "Dr. Beecher, will you please tell us the greatest work that man can do in this world?" "The greatest work," replied the dying theologian, "is not to rule a kingdom. It is not political or ecclesiastical power; neither is it scientific, philosophical, nor even theological knowledge. The greatest work that a person can do in this world is to lead a soul to Jesus Christ."

## II. THE SCOPE OF THE DEBT

"Both to the Greek and the barbarian, to the wise and the unwise." It is said that a Greek philosopher who served as tutor for Alexander the Great when he was a young boy said to him one day, "There are only two kinds of people in the world, Greeks and barbarians." "If that be the case," he responded, "I will capture the world and make Greeks out of everyone." How near he came to succeeding is a matter of history and is reflected in Paul's statement here. "Greeks and barbarians, wise and unwise" points out to us that the debt is universal in its scope. This scope is magnified in the marching orders which Christ gave to the church in Matthew 28, "all nations." In Acts 1:8 "in Jerusalem, in all Judea, Samaria and the uttermost parts of the earth." John 3:16 points up the scope in "God so loved the world" and "whosoever believeth

in Him."

None of God's people in any age have ever had such an opportunity to face up to the scope of this debt as Southern Baptists have today. With all of the resources available to us, we're responsible to God for doing everything we can as rapidly and as effectively as we can. There is no danger of oversimplification of our task. We must preach the gospel as it is to lost people where they are.

When Jesus commanded us to "preach the gospel to every nation," He was not assigning to us an impossible task. No generation that ever lived has had such opportunity as we to carry out His orders. Facilities of transportation, communication and resources make it, not only possible, but probable. The allies of Satan himself are getting their messages into the last home, in the furthest corner of the world. They "hawk" their wares by telestar around the world and deliver their products by jet so it will arrive fresh and at its best. The Jews are buying bonds at 3% interest to rebuild an Israel that excludes Christ and Southern Baptists are still having to charge their own people 6% interest for money to build a church house in which to preach His glorious gospel.

### III. STATUS OF THE ACCOUNT

Conditions such as those just mentioned cause us to realize that "payment on our debt" is long overdue. We add up all the contributions to our Foreign Mission effort last year and are tempted to boast about twenty-five million dollars, when actually a little more than two dollars each for over ten million Southern Baptists was all that kept us from being a bunch of "non-missionary" hard shells." We say to the leaders of our Home Mission Board, Let's get down to business and win American to Christ and then for a period of twelve long months in 1965, we back up our words of concern at the rate of about seventy-five cents each or one and one half cents per week.

If Christ is worth listening to at all, He is worth taking seriously and surely, in

prosperous America, we could not claim to be taking Him seriously with that sort of financial support for our mission programs. For about one hundred years, our convention was satisfied to concentrate its efforts in the South and West as far as America is concerned. During the same time, a great spiritual vacuum existed in the Northeastern part of our land where three fourths of the population of our country lived. In this area, the ratio of unchurched people over those in churches is two to one, just the opposite of the ratio in the old traditional Southern Baptist territory.

We could go less than two hundred miles from this hall tonight in order to take in Chicago, make a two hundred mile trip to Cincinnati, on the Ohio, then draw a line northeast to Baltimore and not only encircle about two thirds of the population of America but also include seven of the nine largest cities of our nation. This area controls every national election, houses the centers of national and world government, mass media, education, finance, commerce and industry. Southern Baptists still have less than fifteen hundred churches in this area. We are late in coming, but thank God, even though the account is way past due, we are here and we are here to stay until Jesus comes.

#### IV. SOME PAYMENTS ON ACCOUNT

Volumes could be written on the blessings of God in this area. Every one of the hundreds of new churches since 1950 is a thrilling story all of its own. Each of these would list a dedicated preacher and family, most of whom paid a tremendous price to come and stay by the work until it was on its feet. None of them could have gotten started without dedicated laymen. God has raised up "a new breed" of laymen in this area, many who have borne the burden in the heat of the day to get a church started when there was no preacher, or prevented one from falling apart when a pastor left. The ratio of Baptisms in this territory is better than one to ten and the opportunity for winning adults to Christ is unlimited.

One pastor came to a little church in Cleveland, Ohio with thirty-one members. He had just graduated from one of our seminaries. He had been trained in our schools, his full-time ministry was made possible by a supplement from our Home Mission Board. A site was secured with help from the Home Mission Board. With a loan from the Board, a modest building was erected the first year, mostly with volunteer labor. Although the pastor did much of the work on the building himself, a goal was set to win to Christ and baptize fifty-one people that year. They went over the goal and with less than one hundred members are running on schedule in an effort to baptize one hundred during this current year. I was preaching for them the morning two of the fifty-one came. One was a teenager and the other a lady in her sixties who had never had anyone talk to her about Jesus until the pastor was in her home. Her husband had made his profession the Sunday before but she had fallen in the mud of the church lawn, walking across boards that had been placed in lieu of a concrete walk. I wouldn't say she was attracted to the church by what they had to offer in the way of beautiful and convenient facilities but that pastor and his people are thoroughly convinced that the "gospel of Jesus Christ is the power of God unto salvation." I would say this is an example of a valid payment on the past due account. Such true stories could be repeated in varying degrees, hundreds of times in this territory but not often enough to even make a dent on the population increase.

Jose Beltran, a native of Spain, product of our Southern Baptist mission work, left Madrid when our church there which he pastored was padlocked by the authorities. He went to the Canary Islands where he could work and with help from our Foreign Mission Board started a work with fourteen people. He baptized forty-four people the first year, 1956, and a total of three hundred since. His church is self-supporting and he has started another one already. During my visit with him, he pled with me with tears streaming down his face, "Brother Roberts, Southern Baptists must win

America for Christ, without that all the rest will be lost."

I believe this with all my heart but I know we can't do it with slow, conventional methods. If we ever make an impact on the masses in America, we are going to have to use every resource that is known to man in confronting them with the Gospel. We have come to know that the gospel has power when it is preached in the unction of the Holy Spirit, whether it be on the street, under a tent, in a rented hall or in a beautiful church building.

If one man can have faith to buy prime time and have an unadulterated evangelistic service on television on a nation-wide hookup, where without apology he takes his Bible, preaches the gospel and pleads with people to be saved, then eleven million Southern Baptists ought to be able to do it. We have scores of people in our state who were saved and hunted up our churches and were baptized into them because of Billy Graham's evangelistic telecast. God has given us wonderful leadership in our Radio and Television Commission but we are not facing our obligation to preach the gospel through the medium of television by telecasting religious soap opera that can be used on "free time." Let's put the means at their disposal whereby the gospel of Jesus Christ can be preached and His claim upon their lives can be presented.

We are going through a period in the life of our Convention when the subtle and indirect approach is being espoused by many. I believe in keeping up with the times and of experimenting with every new and effective way of approaching people. It may not be the best to start down the street with a Bible under our arm, as big as a Detroit telephone directory, button holing people to ask if they know Christ, but I had rather to that than to be so sophisticated and suave that people don't know what my business is. If I should look out my window and see fire belching from the upstairs window of my neighbor's house, I wouldn't calmly pick up the phone and invite him over for coffee in order to give him a lecture on the principles of spontaneous combustion.

We as Southern Baptists are far in arrears in our obligation to preach the gospel to the lost multitudes. The world is in a desperate condition. We are not in position to deal in abstractions, indirect approaches and the low pressure sales method. It is time that we wake up to the perilous times in which we live and begin to act as though we mean business for God.

With the help of Texas Baptists and the Evangelism Division of our Home Mission Board, our churches in the Dayton area are launching an all-out effort next year to confront every one of the one and one half millions who live there with the gospel. Leaders of these two groups have agreed to ask their committees to help provide the resources in finance and man power to plan with us in the greatest all-out evangelistic effort this territory has ever known.

All the mass media will be employed to the fullest. The lost will be located through census and personally contacted. Large central meetings will be conducted, local simultaneous revivals will be held in every church and mission and even in places where new ones will be established. Some of the outstanding preachers of our convention will come to preach in these meetings. Nothing will be spared in this all-out effort to face up to our obligation to tell people about the saving power of the gospel.

We pray that this will ignite a fire in the hearts of our people in this Northern Territory that will spread over the nation. Our prayer is to see a similar effort in every metropolitan area in the North. Already requests are coming from other cities in Ohio to do the same in 1968. By the end of the Crusade of the Americas in 1969, we believe that Southern Baptists will have conducted such an all-out effort in every city in the North. We believe that states other than Texas will want to help with man power and resources, we believe that every commission, Board and agency will do their best to help us. This is an opportunity for Southern Baptists to prove

that they mean business for God in facing up to our unpaid debt.

"Drops of grief can ne'er repay the debt of love I owe,

Dear Lord, I give myself to thee, 'Tis all that I can do."

God has let us live in this glorious day of opportunity. May we not fail Him  
now.