

ANNUAL CONVENTION SERMON

BY GRADY C. COTHEN

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION: Grady C. Cothen, 50, has been president of Oklahoma Baptist University, Shawnee, since July 1, 1966. Previously, he was executive secretary-treasurer of the Southern Baptist General Convention of California, with offices in Fresno, Calif., from 1961-66. A native of Poplarville, Miss., Dr. Cothen graduated from high school in Hattiesburg, Miss.; received the bachelor of science degree from Mississippi College (Baptist), Clinton, Miss.; and the master of theology degree from New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, New Orleans. He has received honorary doctoral degrees from California Baptist College, Riverside and Mississippi College, Clinton. A Navy chaplain during World War II, he became pastor of White Oak Baptist Church, Chattanooga, Tenn., following the war, and was pastor of Olivett Baptist Church, Oklahoma City, from 1948-59. He was first vice president of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1962. He has been a member of the Foreign Mission Board of the SBC and the Executive Boards of the Oklahoma and Alabama conventions. He also has been a trustee for New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary.

"Baptists in the Lunar Age"

By Grady C. Cothen

TEXT: II Cor. 5:17-21

We have come to Denver; some are hurt; some are confused; some are concerned; some are laughing; some are breathing fire; some are confident we will split, and most are expecting a fight.

In short, we look like a capsule of America with all its problems captured in us. How did we get into this position? Let us consider for a moment a portion of the context of our lives. Many of us are depression children. We have known the struggle for food, housing and clothing, and we have watched this struggle become the insatiable itch for two cars, a big house, financial security and color television. We in our country experience unparalleled affluence. Our poor by the standards of much of the world are well off. Never have so many had so much, enjoyed it less and lusted for more. Strikingly, however, our plenty has brought no peace. Our money has furnished little in the way of security. In our houses we have no safety. Our cars take us places but get us nowhere. We travel rapidly arriving out of breath and wondering why we came. That which we thought would satisfy turned out to be like cotton candy—a ball of nothing, faintly sweet, but satisfying not our hunger. In short, we have come to experience and know first hand the poverty of plenty. That which we thought would solve our problems has simply contributed complexity to them.

Consider too that we are finding the limitations of rationality. On every side we experience the explosion of knowledge. It is said that usable knowledge is doubled every ten years and that more than half of the products on the American market today were unknown fifteen years ago. In the world today there are ten thousand journals printed on the subject of chemistry alone. In spite of the explosion of knowledge there seems to be a decline of wisdom.

Technology was once thought to be the savior of the world and the supplier of our needs. Technology is rationality and/or science applied and it has accomplished for us a great deal. It makes it possible for us to fly at the speed of sound, to send men to the moon, to have penicillin and instant communication. The processes of rationality applied in technology have been thought by many to be the possible solution to the problems of our society. We have finally come to realize that we may be exchanging one problem for another. For example, we seem unable to limit the effects of technology. Our

engines that speed us on produce carbon monoxide and sulphur dioxide and foul the air. Our atomic generators once thought to be the final answer for the creation of usable energy may produce so much heat that they could change atmospheric temperature a few degrees, cause the polar ice caps to melt; thus creating a flood upon the whole earth. Our technology has created a many-powered man, but it has also created the ability of man to detonate all life on the planet.

It will probably be possible during this century for man to manipulate human genes. This means that man will be able to create the kind of man that he wants to live upon the earth. This ability will produce enormous moral and ethical problems. What kinds of people should be permitted to live on the earth? How many of what kinds of people should be brought into life? Who has the right or the power or the wisdom to make such decisions as these? Who will be empowered to exercise such controls? Can that power be corrupted? Will the human family become a race of robots controlled by some super monster? We might even ask the pertinent question, will they allow any preachers to be born since there's not much market for us now.

There are some side affects to the new age of rationality. For example, in a time when more people are better educated than ever in the history of the world, the same educated people, young people particularly, are emphasizing feelings. They are talking in terms of that which they feel, that which is intuitive instead of that which is rational.

It is quite obvious that man is a rational being, but he is not omniscient. We begin to see that our rational processes raise us above the animal, but they do not make us gods. Sometimes man is less than rational, for he acts on impulse, on prejudice, on anger and thus he becomes dangerous to himself and all the rest of life.

Man is more than rational. There is a dimension beyond his rationality. There is a part of him that cannot be explained by rational processes. There is a transcendent quality about man and thus there is hope.

Consider too that this is the age of instant knowledge. Daily various media hurl into your living room the blood and sweat and filth and horror and murder and suffering of Vietnam. Or perhaps today's news takes you actually into a ghetto where you see the clubs falling, the rocks being thrown, the looters shouting. Or maybe your five year old is taken by the television into a hospital to see the gore produced by high speed accident. Thus, with a mental photograph or with a glimpse in a flash or with a fragment of information without adequate background, without all of the details, with many of the facts missing, without any insight into the moods or the problems which produced the given situation, we are thrust into some of the most traumatic experiences of the universe.

We have thus created instant public opinion which varies from chapter to chapter daily. These kaleidoscopic psychedelic events cannot help but breed in us uneasiness and confusion. Many people are forced to withdraw to avoid being in the vulnerable position of having their emotions plunged daily into a different maelstrom. Many people instead of withdrawing plunge into the emotion and the circumstance of the moment and discover to their dismay that the water is hot. If a person commits himself emotionally to today's mood created by instant communication he may discover that tomorrow he is isolated from the mood of the day and estranged from those to whom yesterday he felt related. Last month an editor of the Associated Press said "The readers have psychic itch. They have become less tolerant, less civil, less trusting."

The age of instant communication has brought on its own errors, its own inadequacies, and its own inanities. It has furnished the American people the best news coverage in the history of man. It has involved them emotionally in the climatic events of their world in a fashion which man has never experienced before. It has also produced crisis in human emotion that makes it difficult for a man to adjust his ego, his psyche and his emotions on a day to day basis.

Consider further that in the age of rationality and instant communication there comes to our society a crises of caring. The emotional screech of young people rises over the earth. The low sob of neglected old folk is heard in every community. The raucous cry of special interest groups disturbs every city government. The feminists are fanning the fumes as they have not in a long time. One gets the feeling that vast packs of young people can be found in every city hunting a cause about which to care. Hostility flows throughout the entire society. Hostility exists between the schools and society at large. Capital and labor once again are at each other's throat. There is hostility between the young and the old, between the square and the hippie, between the conservative and the liberal. Denominations and churches are not free from these tensions. There is hostility between preachers and lay people and the chasms between us continue to grow.

Dr. Clyde Fant of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary recently said there are four general sources of hostility potential. One, ethnocentrism, the emotional tie up with ones own group. Two, xenophobia, the fear of the stranger and the readiness to hate the stranger. Third, he said, there is a will to survive which brings about in all of us the self defensive action. Four, the angers, frustrations, fears, boredom and disappointments which mark our individual experiences. Everywhere and all around us are these manifestations of emotionalism and tension. Out of this context comes the repetitive cry of the young people, "Nobody cares about us. Nobody seems to be interested in what we want, what we think and what we feel."

One of the most dismal of the problems with which we are confronted is that for so many we seem to be at the time when life has no meaning. Some educator whose name I long since forgot summed up this meaningless life by saying that it is a time when we have no sense of being at home. We seem to have no promise of future usefulness. There is no personal sense of worthwhileness and we are in rebellion against the authority figures and thus we are insecure. In the new age of rationalism, the hallmark of our time has come to be "No man cares for my soul."

Thus what we seem to see is the unrestrained human spirit—supposedly unfettered and free tearing at the cages it builds around itself. Gigantic emotions are daily stimulated by a barrage of misinformation, of causes, of sights, of sounds, of speeding events that we cannot possibly keep up with, to say nothing of understand. Man seems to revert to the primitive—the Adamic nature flourishes.

Thus I suggest to you that society is back on the verge of the jungle. One gets the feeling that we may very well break up into small packs, each identified with a small group of likes, carrying guns and switchblades, trying to maintain our sanity and crying for some dictator to rescue us from ourselves.

It is an era when generations of progress can be lost. Men in rebellion against God may end all life upon the planet. Society depends today as perhaps never before on some who will exercise self restraint. Education certainly helps, but it has sometimes sharpened the meat cleavers of butchers. There is a need for Christians in their finest hour—people who can demonstrate self restraint—people whose Christian faith demands fairness and honesty—people with respect for human dignity—Christians who make no demands for rights or privileges—Christians who restrain themselves in the behalf of others—Christians who will extend understanding to others—people who will manifest acceptance—people who understand and extend forgiveness—people who are interested in second milennium. This is the time for Christians to have their finest hour.

Consider with me then our Baptist response to this situation. We have seen, we have heard, we have felt, and we are afraid.

Hostility surrounds us—hostility from some of our children and from some of us. The changes which have occurred rapidly in our world do not fit our preconceptions. Our churches have been losing their influence and their power. Our favored positions are threatened and our world trembles on the brink of disintegration. Somehow or other we have lost our magic. Our programs don't produce. Our formulas do not work. Everything isn't bigger and better than it was last year and we are afraid. In our fear we begin to cast around to see what can be done, or who is to blame.

We remember our growth and our progress and the baptisms of the '50's, the exhilaration of bigness, and the joys of succeeding. We began to cast around for a way to recapture those days and we committed the inevitable, we tried to institutionalize our gains. We sought frantically to remember, how did we do it and to repeat it. We tried to bring back 1954 with a million more. We demanded that new programs be produced with numbered buttons that pushed in sequence would produce the successes of yesteryear. And when they were provided at our demands we pushed and pushed, and the bangs tapered off into very small pops and finally we heard only a little whistle of escaping air.

We tried frantically to crystallize the success mechanism. We had all the pieces and the wheels but we couldn't seem to put them

together again. We had all the parts but we couldn't find the handle.

And we passed thus into another phase of our history. We forgot that in those years there were long night hours of pleading with God. There was an endless and breathless pursuit of the lost, without much reference to the golf course, the fishing hole, the ease or the annuity. There were the rising currents of the work of the Holy Spirit. Somehow in the transition years we thought to capture Him and use Him for our gratification and glory, instead of the spreading of our spiritual sails to receive His faintest breeze and go whither He wished. In short, some made the fatal mistake of thinking that we could capture God and use Him for our purposes instead of capture ourselves and surrender to His purposes.

Henry P. VanDuesen in his volume *Spirit, Son and Father*, made the following incisive comment. "We may see the logic of spiritual vitality re-enacted again and again in the pilgrimage of the Christian church whereby a period of intense and creative renewal is unfaithfully succeeded by an aftermath of gradually diminishing spiritual vigor but increasing theological and organizational rigidity; then by a time of comparative sterility until revival bursts forth afresh and the curve of ascending life and power is re-enacted." Southern Baptists woke up one morning to find ourselves in stage three, increasing theological and organizational rigidity and apparently rapidly approaching phase four, comparative sterility.

In the transitional stage of denominational history when we failed to institutionalize our gains, we began to try other paths. Some in honesty recognized that we were in transition and tried to find God's path and follow. Some of these have succeeded.

Some have sought creative expressions of faith in social action of the Christian variety. In my opinion, the move in the Southern Baptist Convention toward social action does not have its roots in the old social gospel of the '20's but in the religious surge of the '50's. Many were reading the signs of unrest and sterility and looked for ways of ministering, of finding a way to do the work of God in a changing society. Their motives were often misunderstood and misinterpreted. Some of them were accused of heresy or worse yet, liberalism.

Some honest sincere folk, not understanding—and who does really—found themselves threatened by change and transition. They found that the Gospel did not always succeed with every man in making him what he ought to be. We could learn a lesson from the New Testament, for by man's standards Jesus did not always win. These honest folk became concerned, they feared failure, and we can stand anything except failing. There is something in a man that demands an explanation of his failure that his ego can accept. Consciously or unconsciously, we began to seek ways of explaining what was going on.

Some of the brethren adopted the stance of the defenders of the faith. Many were honest folk, good people, and they fled to the theology of the Bible. This is a good place to go. One would hope that we would flee to the completeness of the Bible with its emphasis upon love, understanding and commitment to Jesus Christ. These defenders of the faith began to say, "here I stand, God, help me, I can do no other." This they often did without realizing that this is where most of us stand. Some stood there to defend the faith by belligerence, which is at best an inconsistency. One could hope that in time these might become proclaimers of the faith. In my judgment, the faith, Christ and the Bible need little in the way of defense—they need only to be proclaimed.

Some among us set up small judgment thrones, pointing accusing fingers at heretics. All over America small inquisitions were organized, running down the heretics, exposing and executing them. Some inquisitors—small in number—threatened one and all without realizing the strange paradox it involved. Often the cry has come, "The Southern Baptist Convention is going to split. We will not long tolerate the excesses of liberalism which we see."

One of the most interesting of phenomena has been that all over America little groups of men sit in their caves on their Mt. Horeb crying, "Lord, there's no one left but me."

In these days of division and search, of transition and confusion, of honest differences and confrontation, a Christian response by all of us would have been brotherly counsel with those thought to be in error. When a brother sinned there should have been communication before the breach. There should have been prayer and pleading. There should have been honest discussion and genuine concern about a brother who departs from faith.

The right and the ability to judge is God's. For a man to judge any of us he must have at least four characteristics. He must have authority over the judged—this God gives to no man. He must have righteousness enough of his own not to be guilty of similar or equal sins—none of us possesses this qualification. He must have complete knowledge of all the facts—I doubt that we have them. And fourth, he must have the wisdom to apply the facts and to discern motives—none of us has this much knowledge and wisdom. We are further

prohibited from sitting in judgment on one another by the oft repeated admonition of our Lord and His followers, "Judge not lest you be judged with the same judgment."

In summary, our problems at least are partially explained by the fact that we adopted secular standards of success for the ministry and the churches. By these standards we must preserve our successes and we were tempted beyond the bearing to preserve our position and prestige. Our careers were suddenly on the line, for the preacher and the church must succeed. We were threatened and frightened, and our institutions were declining. In some minds this was equal to failure. A great deal of psychological scrambling became necessary. It was mandatory to find a stance that was defensible, that eased our guilt and protected our self image.

When we are hemmed in the inevitable tendency is to fight; the instinctive way is to attack others. In this case it was a possible out, unconscious for many. We can call nearly anyone liberal and it can mean nearly anything. I have been called liberal for trying to apply Baptist polity to a Baptist college and more conservative than that you cannot get.

It is human to try to find an object for hostility. The inevitable, psychological temptation for us all would be to retreat to self-righteousness. The inevitable next step is, "We thank thee Lord that we are not as other men are." Good people startled by the siren of hatred and alarm, pushed by the strident song of satan, may find themselves keeping company with, of all people, the Pharisees; "I thank thee Lord that I am not as that Publican."

In our better moments most of us know that God IS. We know Him, we believe in Him and we believe in His leading. We have a faint awareness of the complexity of our age and of our society. We are keenly conscious of the power of evil and we are afraid for ourselves, for our children and for our churches.

But across the land the cry rises from honest men, "Oh, Lord, show us the way."

In spite of all the things which I have said, and without any attempt to appeal to denominational pride, the context which I have been describing is an age made for Baptists. Consider with me briefly what it means to be a Baptist. We are people of the Book. We may differ on interpreting it, or applying it, or what it means, but we are a people of the Book. Others have so claimed, so let us consider some of the major issues for this day of being a people of the Book.

Our theology is bound up in "For God so loved the world." He loved mankind supremely through Jesus Christ who died, was buried, rose again, ascended to the right hand of the Father and He is coming again. God loved man by reaching out through the ministry of the Holy Spirit in conviction, in conversion and in the gradual conquering of the spirit of man. God has loved man through the ministry of the church, through the ministry of men; and has loved them by reaching to them, nurturing them and maturing them. The evidence of the love of God is everywhere visible to those who have eyes to see.

The love of God speaks to the identity crisis. The man who identifies himself as a son of God has found himself. He has put his feet on a straight and narrow path to the realization of his selfhood, to the realization of his sonship, and to the realization of his ministry and mission. The man who identifies himself as a son of God is in the best possible position to minister to the needs of the earth.

The love of God speaks to the crisis of alienation. We have believed that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself. The alienation of man from man, and the alienation of man from God, constitute the basic reasons for the difficulties in which the world finds itself today. The theology of Baptists has centered in the fact of the love of God and that he was quite capable of accepting man as He found him, and loving him to become what he ought to be. The point of the coming of Christ was to cure the alienation of man from God and to relate men together as brothers. This theology is as pertinent to the here and now as it has ever been. In the crisis of caring in our world, no message could be more meaningful to distraught humanity than that "God so loved the world."

God's love speaks to the crisis of our institutions. If the direction of our institutions can be brought under the direction of God in love, the institutions will have built into themselves the ability of self realization, self correction and self control.

In short, God's love is relevant to a technological age. It is as up to date as a plaintive plea of a hippie on a downtown street corner. Never have so many needed God's love so much. In the love of God our spirit can luxuriate, our mind can take rest, our restless souls can find security and our distraught lives can find purpose.

Consider for a moment our Baptist ethic. Because we are a people of the Book, the ethical structure of our lives must be bound up with "thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." In short, to be truly Christian our faith must affect human relationships. I am His

child, but you are His child too, and thus we are brothers together in Christ.

Our love then under God reaches out to each other. It means acceptance of each other. It means Baptists from Boston and Virginia and Florida and Mississippi and Texas and California accepting one another, one another's accent and lifestyle, accepting each other at face value as Christians until conduct proves otherwise. Christian love means loyalty to each other. It means forgiveness of one another whether it is deserved or not. It means faith in our brothers, confidence in their integrity, in their ability, and trusting in them as Christian brothers. Christian love means self giving. It means that we are willing to give ourselves to each other; that we are willing to be vulnerable to abuse or hurt simply because we love one another. We are willing to get out on the emotional limbs of brotherly love, risking serious emotional damage for the sake of expressing to each that which Christ expressed to us.

This does not mean that we abandon our individual positions, but when our brother is wrong we weep over him instead of calling him names. We counsel with him instead of threatening him. We pray for him instead of blackmailing him. We try to help him instead of abandoning him. If some how we can catch the vision of ministry and mission to each other as we have caught the meaning of ministry and mission to a lost world, we may very well put ourselves back in the position that God can use us to reach a lost world. Without the ability to demonstrate the love of God in human practice we may very well sacrifice our ability to preach the love of God in an effective fashion in a fallen society.

Our Baptist ethic, loving our neighbor as ourselves, involves us in reaching out to fallen man. While it is our spiritual responsibility to hate sin, it is equally our responsibility to love the sinner. One of the sorest epithets hurled at Jesus was that they called Him the friend of sinners. He was! It was that fact that let me in. If He had not been a friend of sinners I surely would have been excluded. By being a friend of sinners He did not stoop to wrong, but he stooped to wrong doers. What a message to Baptists today! We are not to fall into the ways of the world, but we are to go into the ways of the world and compel them to come in.

I walked recently on Peachtree Street in old Atlanta, Georgia. A section of it has become a Hippie Community, as other cities have had their own spring suddenly to life. There I saw a teen-age girl, some father's daughter, dirty, unkempt, hair matted, peddling filth. As I looked at her I thought that this was someone's child and undoubtedly some place a parent's heart was breaking; someone was longing to see a daughter for whom such fond hopes had been sustained, to come back home, to come back to right. But as I looked at her in her dirt with her perverted ideas, and with her feeling of hostility, my own hostility grew. Then I remembered that it was one of these people that bathed the feet of Jesus with her tears and wiped them with her hair. It was for these people He surely died.

The ethic of Southern Baptists—of Christians—"Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself," speaks clearly to the age in which we live. It may very well be that if this became the hallmark of the Southern Baptist Convention our greatest day of ministry and service would be yet before us.

Finally, consider with me a moment our Baptist polity. Because we are a people of the Book, we have believed in the priesthood of all believers. Mullins in his remarkable little volume, *The Axioms of Religion* written in 1908 which says much about modern Baptist polity, said that the mother principle is the competency of the soul in religion under God. This fits precisely what we conceive to be the scriptural teaching concerning a free man under God. No coercion of any description is to be allowed in religion. Each man is under the influence of the Holy Spirit and is responsible to God for himself. This doctrine of the freedom of man but with responsibility to God, fits the spirit and the need of this age.

One of the axioms of religion is that every believer in the church has equal privileges. We often describe this as the democracy of the church. One of the curious problems of our age is the rebellion of young people against the lack of democracy in the church. They think we have a habit of excluding those who may disagree with us. We seem to wish to isolate those who do not see things exactly as we see them. If we actually practiced the democracy of the church with equal privileges for all believers we would cure many of our church ills today.

To extend our Baptist polity a little farther, we believe in free churches, voluntarily associated together for the propagation of the Gospel. This allows for difference of emphasis, for differences in social classes and differences in human needs.

Voluntariness then is one of the key factors in all of Baptist polity. Parenthetically, it should be said that the Baptist institutions created as a result of our denominationalism sustain different polity relationships from those of the individuals who constitute the in-

stitutions. Oklahoma Baptist University is owned and operated by the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma. It was created within the framework of a particular set of situations by the Convention to achieve specific purposes. The Convention has a right and a responsibility to control its own institution for its own purposes. As free men under God become members of the community they are voluntarily assume limitations on their freedom. These limitations are assumed in order to achieve the purpose of the denomination for the institution. In the context of the institution while they may exercise their freedom, it is limited by the demands of the denomination which created the institution. At the point where individual rights and institutional rights come into conflict, the individual is always free to leave the community. The community must be controlled by the creating agency and used for the purposes for which it was created.

Strangely enough these things are easily comprehended by our young people and they simply want to see these things in practice. Our polity fits the age and it speaks to the needs of young people in this kind of society. The greatest need of the hour in Baptist polity is not that it should be changed but that it should be practiced.

This is an age made for a people of the Book. The troubled people of the earth need the love of God. They need to know how and have power to love one another. They need a sense of purpose to life.

They need a rock to stand on when the floods come. They need the security of God in time and eternity. God will speak to them, for He loves them. The question we face is whether He will use us.

As I have traveled across America in the last months, speaking, listening, it seems to me that I have heard the quiet whisper of the Spirit's work, perhaps even the faint stirrings of spiritual awakening. In a Methodist school in Kentucky the students say spiritual awakening has come. It can be heard in a prayer meeting in a church in Atlanta, where people are quietly asking God to do the unusual. The whisper of revival is in the voice and spirit of an assistant pastor in one of our large first churches as the young people insist on hearing what the Bible says on sex. The whisper of revival was in the conversation of two Methodists and two Baptists of wealth and refinement in Florida as they were praying for pray-ers. The whisper of revival moves among students concerned about students. The beginning rustle of a spiritual outbreak—undercover yet—is sensed all over the land.

My challenge to Southern Baptists is that under God we may confess our own sins to each other and to God and then with one voice we may cry out "here we are oh Lord; we are not mad any more; we have no righteousness of our own; we have no will but thine; we pray that you will come to us, cleanse us and use us; oh God, don't pass us by, revive us too for thy glory."