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Improved Baptist Relations With Catholics, Others, Cited

NASHVILLE (BP)--Improved relations and communications between Southern Baptists and other Christian groups in the world were cited by two Baptist denominational leaders during the annual Southern Baptist Convention Communications Conference here.

After four and one-half centuries of "cold and hot war" between Baptists and Catholics in particular, "a thaw has come," said C. Emmanuel Carlson of Washington, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs.

Carlson, in an address on "Baptists and Christian Unity: Communication with Other Christian Groups," outlined the basic, biblical and spiritual bases for Christian unity, and listed ways that Christian groups in America are communicating with each other.

Carlson said that the New Testament is full of scripture passages that give authority for "given unity", or the invisible bond that joins all Christians together under the Lordship of Christ.

"We would not be logical if we try to deny this, for we would be denying the authority of Christ if we did," Carlson said.

As other levels of unity, Carlson listed sociological unity and organizational unity, adding that many Baptists are fearful of the image of a "super church," or a "monolithic structure that towers over us."

The other speaker, Clifton J. Allen of Nashville, reacted to Carlson's address, citing reasons why Baptists should be concerned about Christian unity.

"I think we have something to contribute" to discussions on Christian unity, said Allen, editorial secretary of the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board.

Allen said a leader of another denomination once told him that Southern Baptists seem to have "an awareness of the reality of the Lordship of Jesus Christ not easily seen in our relationships with other Christians."

"Wouldn't it be wonderful," said Allen, "if we could contribute a sense of the Lordship of Jesus Christ as a basis for Christian unity in this world?"

"It is probably true," he said, "that in the whole field of communications with Christian groups, Southern Baptists are less effective in the area of communication with other Christian groups than any other."

Allen said that a study of Baptist history and practice would probably show "that we are uncertain about the meaning of Christian unity and defective in communicating with other groups."

"I think it would be true that Baptists tend to be self-contained, to be suspicious, and defensive with respect to relationships with other Christian groups," he said.

"How do we account for this situation?" he asked. "Is it due to our theology, our ecclesiology, our cultural background, or what?"

"Do we have any (Southern Baptist) channels of communication which are officially authorized, openly recognized, and responsibly exercised?" he further asked.

As an example, Allen said it is rather tragic that Catholics, and many other Christian groups, are publishing journals on Christian unity, while Baptists do not.

"Why should we yield to other groups to take the leadership in the promotion of a true Christian unity around the world?" he asked.

He listed six reasons why Baptists should improve communications with other Christian groups: (1) to learn from others, (2) to correct false pride, (3) to interpret Baptists to others, (4) to more effectively deal with the great social ills in human society, (5) to save a generation of young people who must take their place in the context of a new age, and (6) to avoid a greater fragmenting of a truly biblical witness to the world.

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"Our real theology would literally drive us to a recognition of the contribution we could make in this (last) area; for we declare that all who are redeemed in Christ Jesus are our brothers--it is not a matter of denominational or institutional or church relationship, but rather a matter of relationship to Christ as Lord," he said.

Carlson, earlier, had listed four spiritual bases for Christian unity: (1) the nature of Christ's work and his authority, (2) the nature and meaning of Christian ordinances, (3) the significance of personal profession, and (4) the meaning of Christian witness.

He cited a historic meeting only a week earlier between Catholics and Baptists in the District of Columbia area on the theme "Our Common Witness." Carlson said that a Catholic priest who spoke at the meeting gave a definition of "witness" that was quite acceptable to Baptists.

He listed several levels of communication between Christians: personal conversation, worship, learned channels, reflective fellowships in working groups and committees, symbols and the arts, ethics in action, and through vicarious consultations.

During the discussion period following the two speeches, a Baptist editor asked if the disunity between Baptists and other Christian groups is largely based on doctrinal differences.

Replied Carlson: "We are naive if we think the problem is doctrinal," adding that disunity is primarily rooted in history, culture, and tradition.

"We sometimes talk as if we are dealing with the pure gospel, but I've yet to find any religious movement that doesn't have the soil of its own environment in the boat with it," he said.

The Communications Conference was held here during the semi-annual session of the Southern Baptist Executive Committee.

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New Theology Trends
Outlined to Baptists

9/21/66

NASHVILLE (BP)--Trends in theology in the Christian world today, along with an interpretation of where Southern Baptists ought to fit into these contemporary theological currents, were outlined here by a Southern Baptist theologian.

James Leo Garrett, professor of Christian theology at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, delivered the scholarly address to the Southern Baptist Communications Conference.

From a historical viewpoint, Garrett said that the 1960's "are a time of abrupt transition in theology, among Roman Catholics as well as Protestants."

The last five years have marked the end of an era of the Protestant theology of neo-orthodoxy, the beginning of a new radical theology commonly called the death of God theology, and the beginning of a new era in Roman Catholic theology, said Garrett.

Interpreting the significance of these three trends in theology, Garrett explained the views of these and other theological concepts.

"The passing (neo-orthodox) era stressed the given, the revealed, and was more concerned with authenticity than with relevance," Garrett said.

"The coming (the radical or death of God theology) era gives its primary attention to the Christian message to modern man and/or the unbelieving world, and is more concerned with relevance than with authenticity.

"The present transition is marked by the resurgence of vitality in Roman Catholic theology," which may be "the most significant revolution in Roman Catholic theology since the Council of Trent."

Garrett said that Roman Catholic theology has entered into "a new and creative era in which the recovery of Biblical categories has been coupled with a new openness and awareness of the needs and yearnings of contemporary man."

Garrett said that although liberal Protestant theology has never really died out in the United States, its heyday was in the first third of the century and it was succeeded by the neo-orthodoxy or realistic theology era.

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"Some Baptists, including some in the Southern Baptist Convention, are still fighting liberalism or its extreme modernism as if neo-orthodoxy had never risen," Garrett said.

He compared the new radical theology just beginning in the 1960's to the liberal Protestant theology of the early part of the century, asking: "Are the radical theologies now current a renewal of or a return to the late 19th century or early 20th century Protestant liberalism?"

Quoting Thomas J. J. Altizer, William Hamilton, and Paul M. VanBuren, the so-called death of God theologians, Garrett said that these writers believe that Christianity has to do with Jesus, not the Father, for "the gospel according to Altizer is the good news that God has died."

"Where ought Southern Baptists to fit into these contemporary currents?" he asked.

Garrett then delivered "a clarion appeal for careful assessment of the Biblical and historic Christian categories and their abiding significance before these should be scuttled for the latest theological fad."

"This is not a plea for an unthinking traditionalism," he said, "and certainly not for the status-quo in communication.

"It is an urgent plea that in the race for relevance we not lay aside that authentic Christian message and life that are our very reason for running at all," he declared.

"In this direction we ought to seek to make our contribution, and that not merely within our own ranks," he said.

Later in a question and answer period, Garrett was asked where Southern Baptist theologians stand in relationship to the new trends in theology.

"In general," he replied, "our theologians have sought to be faithful to our heritage and to be conversant with and open to various trends on the horizons. But there is little indication that Southern Baptist leadership is prepared to go into the ranks of the death of God movement."

He said a key question is how to emphasize the Biblical and historical dimensions of Christian truth so that they will be heard by the present generation.

"We are not teaching the same kind of folk that we were when we were students," he said. Seminary students today have not come from a sheltered and protected environment, but rather have faced many of these issues and questions on state college campuses.

Speaking of the death of God theology, Garrett said that they are placing so much emphasis on "what modern man will accept," and yet we don't really know "he will accept this modified gospel any more than he would have in the first century."

Garrett said he was not willing to toss aside "our historic heritage" and a Biblically based theology, but there is a sense "in which we must be modern without being captivated by the errors of modernity."