

November 18, 1958

Dear Baptist Editor:

In a previous mailing of the Baptist Press, there was an article for general publication on the religious aspects involved in our nation's civil defense program.

This feature was based on information received in a briefing for writers and editors of religious periodicals. This briefing was conducted in Battle Creek, Mich., at the Office of Civil and Defense Mobilization Nov. 4-5.

While the feature story offered is for general distribution, I thought that you would like to have some background on the subject--material which I doubted would have any general interest to readers but about which you as editors would be concerned.

Your first thought, most likely, is that the civil defense program was criticized in one particular at the annual meeting of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs recently. The thinking was that a phase of the civil defense program tended to infringe on separation of church and state, that phase being the dangers of Communism and a belief that the civil defense agency might attempt to exercise unnecessary pressure on ministers to preach on subjects related to the Communist threat.

Dr. Fred W. Kern, director of the office of religious affairs for OCDM, has been in the ministry for 23 years. He is a member of the United Lutheran Church in America and has served with OCDM in that capacity for four years.

Dr. Kern made it a point--on his own initiative--to assure me that his office had no intent to try to tell preachers what to preach about. It was not absolutely clear in my mind whether at one time that might have been his intention and subsequent reaction caused him to change it, or whether he somehow had not made his position clear enough.

At any rate, he seemed very sensitive on the church-state separation issue and it came up numerous times during the two-day conference. It might be said that this conference was attended by 21 editors and writers including two Roman Catholic editor-priests, and representatives of the publications of The Methodist Church, Seventh-Day Adventists, three Baptist conventions, National Association of Evangelicals, Reformed Church, ULCA, Disciples of Christ, Missouri Synod Lutherans, Christian Reformed Church, Pentecostal Holiness churches, United Brethren churches, and Wesleyan Methodists.

One of the Baptist persons was Martin Erikson of the Baptist General Conference of America, a participating organization in the Joint Committee. It might be noted further that Mr. Erikson attended the meeting at Washington at which the Joint Committee made its criticism.

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Civil Defense Memo To Editors

The position of the Seventh-Day Adventists on religious liberty is well-known. Neither the Seventh-Day Adventist editor nor Mr. Erikson expressed any sentiment in my presence that the civil defense program, as presented, constituted an infringement on church-state separation. In fact, once when Dr. Kern brought it up (after numerous previous references), the Seventh-Day Adventist editor said his denomination was a strong defender of religious liberty but that he personally had no belief that Dr. Kern's point violated that principle.

Thus it appeared from the things said and done during those two days that the office of religious affairs does not want to do anything that will invite criticism from Baptists or Seventh-Day Adventists on the principle of religious liberty.

Much of the briefing was on general civil defense matters and was the same type of information that would have been given to any group of people. However, special talks and discussion periods were included at which religious aspects and the role of the church press were the main topics of consideration.

Some of the prospects of nuclear war--to be a bit trite--are most alarming. Yet when you consider that there can be an attack on our nation with only a three-hour notice (and with further development of inter-continental ballistic missiles this will be reduced to 15 minutes), it is enough to make you quite uneasy.

It is some relief to know that civil defense is getting ready, that one of their major projects for 1959 is to have as many as possible of the 44 state legislatures meeting in that year enact laws outlining succession in government deeper than ever before---to seven persons for the governor and to three persons for most other important executive, legislative, and judicial positions. This is to assure that someone with legal executive and judicial authority survives to bring about order after any attack.

But the fact that such plans are being made and that America can apparently retaliate in such massive strength as to render Communism incapable of delivering any second attack will not bring back to life anyone nor repair the injuries and damages inflicted in a first assault.

It seemed to me that we had two avenues as Baptists through which to take action: (1) to back up our SBC Committee on World Peace and our missionary boards; to work for peace and the spread of the Christian Gospel with more conviction and consecration than ever, and (2) to seriously consider our civil defense responsibilities as religious organizations until there is no longer a threat of international hydrogen warfare.

The office in Battle Creek, at the unanimous request of editors and writers present, indicated it would begin sending material to editors of religious periodicals about America's civil defense program--- not in any "pressure" move but simply as information to the editors, first, and to the readers also if the editors felt the material worthy of publishing.

Theo Sommerkamp
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