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MESSENGERS OF THE CHURCHES AND THE GLORY OF CHRIST

Churches will soon be naming messengers to this year's sessions of the Southern Baptist Convention, to be held in Louisville, May 19-22. Registration cards, to be properly certified by church officers, have been mailed to the Baptist state headquarters offices and are available on request to your state secretary.

The Convention's constitutional provision respecting the appointment of messengers is printed on the registration card, and may be found also in Article III of the Convention Constitution (see 1958 Southern Baptist Convention Annual, page 27).

In view of the significance of this appointment and certification of messengers, churches are requested to give prayerful and orderly attention to this matter. -- Joe W. Burton, Secretary, Southern Baptist Convention.

Editor's Note -- Last year at the Convention in Houston, Ralph A. Herring, pastor of the First Baptist Church, Winston-Salem, North Carolina, brought a message on the significant position of messengers to the annual sessions of the Southern Baptist Convention. Below is a portion of that message, which many felt to be one of the truly significant utterances in our present denominational life.

"Whether any inquire about . . . our brethren, they are the messengers of the churches, they are the glory of Christ" (2 Cor. 8:23).

In this hospitable city the citizens undoubtedly inquire among themselves, What about these Baptists who have gathered here in such numbers? Throughout this vast state and nation the public in general looks to this Convention representing nine million of its citizens and asks, Who are they, and what may we expect of them?

The attention of other Christian bodies, out sister denominations, is most certainly focused upon us, and we would be foolish to forget it. Peoples of other lands where churches and institutions are fostered through our missionary agencies certainly look this way with deepest concern.

With prophetic insight, then, the great Apostle Paul has anticipated our own situation with his timely word, "If any man inquire about our brethren--"

To answer his question we must find ourselves individually in relation to the cooperative enterprises of our churches. I am not speaking now of that mystical sense in which we are members of the body of Christ, but rather of that practical sense in which we are organized as a Convention.

How may our local churches through us as messengers work together to accomplish that which is too great for any one of them to undertake singlehandedly? How may this be done so that our initiative and imagination as individuals are not dissipated in the bigness of the enterprise or lost in a ponderous ecclesiasticism?

In short, how can we as messengers of the churches become the glory of Christ?

There are enterprises in which we may well engage cooperatively which are too big for any one church. There are potentials in such enterprises unfolding like a panorama of grace to thrill and to challenge our best endeavor-- but how? Does the New Testament teach us how we are to proceed?

This question is of tremendous importance. Our world has grown complex. We have journeyed far from the simplicities of New Testament times. The efforts of Paul to enlist the churches of his day seem primitive by comparison with those of this Convention. The simple mechanics even of a generation ago are out-moded. Boards, commissions, committees, institutions, agencies all but overwhelm us. We are actually calling in experts to keep us from getting hopelessly involved

in the multiplicity of our own procedures.

Again I ask, in a day so complex does Scripture supply a guiding principle? I hasten to answer, it does! We have it clearly stated in the passage before us. "Our brethren? Why, they are the messengers of the churches, the glory of Christ!"

It is that word "messenger" upon which I would focus your attention. It reveals the guiding principle by which we may work together to the glory of Christ. Actually in the original the word is "apostles"--not in the sense in which the Holy Spirit has appointed in the churches some to be "apostles" (Eph. 4:11), but with the very practical meaning of those "sent from" the churches. We gather from verse 19, that these brethren were "appointed by the churches" in exactly the same way that you and I were appointed as messengers from our churches.

Now, your position as a messenger to this Convention is supplied by your local church, and that is a very important thing. Except as your local church certifies your right to recognition by this body, you cannot be enrolled as a messenger, you cannot so much as chirp upon the floor of this Convention.

You may be the president of an institution, a general secretary, but your right to the floor is found ultimately in your relation to your local church. You are not here as an alumnus or as a teacher or editor or executive. You are here as a messenger from your church by which you have been duly appointed.

Your prime responsibility as messengers is to seek the vigor and vitality of the churches which sent you here, to find under the leadership of God's Spirit through counsel and deliberation with others the means of fulfilling the larger task committed by our Lord to them.

Whatever issue comes before an association, convention, or alliance, the determining factor must be, How will it affect the welfare of the churches and help them in the work they have been divinely commissioned to do?

The operation of this principle explains why matters extraneous to the provisions of the New Testament are not well received upon the floor of a Baptist convention.

It is the duty of the messengers of the churches to see that they are lifted above the merely humanitarian and cultural level to propagandize the gospel of Jesus. Compromise by any of its institutions with a world system that rejects Jesus will find no hospitality among messengers who are aware that they were appointed by a body of baptized believers and who remember that in their baptism they profess to have been crucified unto the world and the world unto them.

The responsibility of every messenger, therefore, is summed up in the words seven times repeated by our glorified Lord in His letters to the churches of Asia. There He speaks for all time when He says, "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches" (Rev. 2:7 etc.).

To me it is a very instructive thing that Christ says "hear what the Spirit saith to the churches" instead of saying "hear what I say unto the churches" He is the head of the church.

And this further thing is worthy of note in the sevenfold command of our glorified Lord. What the Spirit says to the churches He says individually to those who compose their membership.

I believe that the greatest danger Baptists face in coping with the problems of our day lies in the substitution of the wisdom of this world and purely human strategies for the Spirit's leadership. On the other hand, if we fulfill our destiny it will be because we have heard and heeded, each man for himself, what the Spirit saith to churches.

Therein lies our responsibility. And for the benefit of those who may inquire, therein shall we be found true "messengers of the churches, the glory of Christ."

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"PREACHER IN A GOLDFISH BOWL"

By James C. Hefley

Metairie, La.

The Spradling Baptist Church was contemplating building or buying a parsonage. They were discussing how far it should be from the church.

A woman member who had been reared in a parsonage told the pastor: "If they decide to build next door to the church I'll fight it. I remember when I was a child and someone borrowed my red-buttoned shoes from the parsonage adjoining the church. I never saw my shoes again. I don't believe any preacher should have to loan his belongings to the church members."

She didn't have to fight. The church chose a site 1.7 miles away from the sanctuary.

The pastor of another church wasn't so fortunate. He occupied a rented dwelling next door. The church paid the rent and on Sundays his home was used for extra Sunday school rooms.

One night members travelled to a neighboring church for a baptismal service since they had no baptistry. Four small babies were left on the parsonage bed in the care of a teen-age girl. When the pastor and his wife returned the bed was soaked. They spent the night on the living room couch. Next morning at six an eccentric church-goer rapped loudly. He had been to the country and had brought back a Mississippi cotton stalk. Would the pastor please give it to a friend of his?

This pastor's wife kept a tabulated record of meals eaten without company present for one week. Only one meal eaten alone was recorded and this was an unusually-early breakfast.

She declared: "It was difficult to have devotions without children peeking through a window." During her stay next door to the church she lost her expected baby. Her doctor advised, "Move at once!" This pastor and wife moved and began paying their own rent.

Still another pastor lived upstairs over the church's youth center. When the tension began to tell on his wife, her doctor ordered them to move. With the aid of friends they built their own home approximately one mile from the church.

Most pastors seem to prefer the parsonage or pastorium to be a mile or more from the church. One pastor gives these reasons for not living next door:

1. Next door to the church the pastor gets stale and is not his best for the Lord.
2. A preacher is no different from any other working man. He wants to get away from his work at times.
3. Being located too close can breed ill feelings. The old saying, "contempt is the only flower that grows in the garden of familiarity," is often true in this case. Additional reasons are given by still another pastor--one who has lived both "next door" and at a secluded distance.
4. It becomes too easy for the church to use the pastor's home for extra Sunday School rooms. When he lives by the church.
5. Usually cheaper property can be obtained at a distant location. The church often needs the pastorium property later on for expansion, anyway.
6. The preacher's house becomes a goldfish bowl instead of a home. He is not able to get the rest vitally needed for strenuous spiritual activities.

But proponents of the "parsonage next door to the church" can cite some strong views to support their views:

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1. It is convenient for the church members.
2. The pastor is at the hub of his work. He is among the people.
3. Seekers and people who need help can more easily find the pastor when needed.

Although there are still differences of opinion, more and more churches are becoming interested in saving their preacher and family, instead of exposing them to the strain and stress of "goldfish bowl" life. They are building parsonages at comfortable distances that are designed to be true homes instead of glass houses for curious members to observe and invade the home life of their pastors.