

GOD AND COMPANY - BUILDERS

Dr. John Allan Lavender

I Cor. 3:9

A great deal has happened in the last few weeks and the reaction to these happenings has been swift and varied. On the one hand we have the reaction of Presidential Assistant Howard W. Pyle who, when speaking at the Northern Baptist Seminary Convocation said:

“Thank God! All across our nation Americans have suddenly awakened to the fact that we are in a struggle for survival and that if we are going to win, every one of us is going to have to pay a price.”

To that thoughtful, penetrating analysis many of us can say a quiet “amen.”

But there has been another reaction, too. And that is one of panic. Quite by chance the other evening I saw a televised report of the nation’s response to Sputnik. I heard words like terrifying, disastrous, dreadful, disappointing. One mother told how her young daughter has been unable to sleep for three nights, she is so filled with fear.

A young teenager was asked what she planned to do now that the proud, naive illusion of America’s inevitable superiority has been thoroughly shattered. Her response gives one pause for thought: “I’m going to live it up,” she said. “It doesn’t look like I have much time left for fun.”

Some of us are shocked! And yet, why should we be shocked? Haven’t many of us been saying the same thing? By our obsession with a better house in a better neighborhood... a bigger bank account... a finer car... membership in the right clubs... acceptance by the proper social clique... haven’t we by our obeisance to the altar of things been saying to our children: “Let’s eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die”?

Although we haven’t used those words, but by our example we have been teaching our children

that the things that really matter are the things that happen in the here and now.

And so the youngster who, in the face of crisis, wants to “live it up” is not too much out of step with her elders who have forgotten that, for the Christian at least, life is not measured by time but by eternity.

Well, what’s the answer? One thing is certain: it won’t be found by star gazing. There has been a lot of interest in the tiny satellites that whirl around us up there above the stratosphere. But the answer does not lie up there somewhere. It is all very interesting and intellectually stimulating, but our problem is not intellectual. It is spiritual. And instead of earnest star gazing we need some honest soul staring. We need to look at our own lives, hearts and motivations. For we are both the problem and the answer. The sickness and cure.

There is an ancient Chinese Proverb which states, “If you want a cleaner city you must begin by cleaning up your own backyard.” We might paraphrase it to read: “If you want a better world you must begin by removing the evil from your own heart and life.” That is a hard saying and we do not like to hear hard sayings. For, modern man wants to completely rebuild society without going through the painful process of completely rebuilding his own life.

But, that’s the only way it will ever be done. If we are going to have a better world, then we must build it. The national and international problems with which we wrestle ultimately resolve into a personal equation in which you and I are the equalizing factors.

Some time ago there came to my desk a copy of a letter written by a veteran of the last great war. This is what he said:

“My name is John Crown. I am a paraplegic in Halloran General Hospital. I will never walk again. But my physical wounds are small compared to my spiritual wounds. I, who have lived close to death for two years and have seen my comrades die for the cause of peace, can now find no peace in the world or in my

country. The reasons why there is no peace seem infinitesimally flimsy. Russia wants the Dardanelles. Yugoslavia wants Trieste. The Moslems want India. Labor wants more wages. Capital wants more profits. Smith wants to pass the car and front of him. Junior wants more spending money.

“To these I say, is it necessary to kill and cripple human beings for your petty gains? Anyone who thinks the human body and the immortal soul of a man is so cheap it can be traded for a tract of land, a piece of silver, or a few minutes of time on the highway, ought to be forced to listen to the moans of the dying night and day for the rest of his life. All the troubles of the world originate with the common man. The selfish, greedy ways of nations are just the way of each individual man multiplied ten thousand fold. As long as we as individuals live on a low moral plain, so will be the earth.”

This young warrior, shattered in body and Spirit by the great god Mars, has seen through the sham and hypocrisy of our age. He has gone to the tap root of our tree of difficulty and he has seen it for what it really is: The individual and his or her relationship to God.

This brings me to my theme: “God and Company -- Builders.” For in this great struggle for survival... in this Titanic test of strength to see who alternately will win the world... the Christian church with its message of reconciliation with God is the only factor which can tip the scale in favor of the West.

We cannot destroy communism with atom bombs or inter-Continental ballistic missiles. We cannot drive it out of the minds of men with force and hate. But we can crowd it out of the hearts of men with Christian love. The only way we can hope to conquer a great idea like communism is with a greater idea. And in the Christian gospel of the love of God, the Christian church has that greater idea.

But the tragedy of the hour is that the church does not occupy first place in our lives. It is just one more pot on an already overcrowded stove. And as a result, the church does not stir the world... amaze the world... cause the world to listen.

And so, this morning, I say with the all the sober sincerity of my soul (and if this is treason, then make the most of it) unless the church of Jesus Christ experiences a great revival, a revival that lifts us out of our lethargy, liberates us from our cold formality and ignites us like a consuming fire, then America, like every other nation, will go down. For, either this nation will be ruled by God, or it will be ruled by tyrants.

Well, where does that place you as a Christian, as one small cell in this great body of Christ we call the church? My friend, it places you at the vortex of this swirling dilemma in which are world finds itself. As an active partner in this great enterprise known as “God and the Company-Builders” you are at the very heart of the matter. For, as Paul points out “we are laborers together with God” in the great task of winning the world for Christ... so that ultimately God’s will will be done on earth even as it is done in Heaven.

How can you help in this great construction job which has been assigned to the firm of “God and Company-Builders”? The most obvious answer is by --

Giving That “Company” First Place in Your Life.

You see, the Church is not really just one more pot on an already overcrowded stove. It is the fire which gives heat and warmth to everything else. The difficulty with many of us is that we have thought we can take the Church, or leave it and alone. We have put it on a plane with the service club, the YMCA, the cultural society, the fraternal organization. But by so doing we have only added to our problem.

If Christ and His Body... the Church... are just something we tack on to our many other duties, then by becoming Christians we do not simplify life, we complicate it. But if we put Christ and

his Body first... if we make him the center of our lives... then all else is remolded and integrated by him.

Instead of mounting our charger and riding off in all directions at once, we suddenly find that all the good, worthwhile... but second rate causes... which have clamored for our attention are relegated to their rightful place.

Now I'm all for the right kind of social service agencies. I belong to several. But the great need of our world today is not food, clothing, shelter... although these are desperately important... the deepest need of man is God. As Thomas Kelly points out:

“We have mistaken the nature of poverty and thought it was economic poverty.

No! It is poverty of soul. It is the absence of God.”

Everywhere you turn today there are people who by their very frantic, frenzied pursuit of stuff give evidence of the fact that what they really need is God. And they have no one to turn to but you. As a Christian you are the obvious one to give help and guidance. But beloved, you cannot give to others what to do not have yourself.

S. Parkes Cadman was one of the spiritual giants of the last generation. When he was past 70 he had such vigor of mind and body that it seemed he would live forever. And when he died he left a lonesome place against the sky. One of his friends tells of riding briefly with him in a car. He says,

“During that short trip Dr. Cadman opened a window through which I have seen the condition of the Church ever since. As we drove along he suddenly turned to me, and with a choke in his voice he said, “Fred, my church is slipping and my men won't do anything about it. Do you know what is wrong with my church, Fred?

I'll tell you. My people like me, but they don't love God!”

I must confess that I have wondered about that myself sometimes. When we see attendance

vacillate by 25 percent or more from one Sunday to the next for no apparent reason... erratic giving patterns... Sunday school sagging... youth group interest rising and falling like a feather in the wind... one cannot help but wonder, do the people involved really love God?

Oh, I know you're busy. But our problem is not lack of time. For even when the pressures of life are terrific we find time to do what we really want to do.

You say you don't get anything out of Church when you come? Could it be that you come in the wrong spirit? Or that when you come, you put nothing of yourself into it? You know, the church is like a bank. It goes bankrupt if you take more out of it than you put in.

“If you want to have the kind of church
Like the kind of a church you like,
You need not slip your clothes in a grip
And start on a long, long hike.
You will only find what you've left behind,
For there's nothing really new.
It's a knock at yourself when you knock your church,
It isn't the church, it's you.

“It's really strange sometimes, don't you know,
That things go as well as they do.
When we think of the little, the very very little
We add to the work of a few.
We sit and complain at what has to be done
And do very little but fuss.
Are we bearing our share of the burdens to bear?
It isn't a church, it's us.

“So, if you want to have the kind of a church
Like the kind of a church you like,
Put off your guile and put on your best smile,
And hike my brother, just hike
To the work at hand that has to be done,
The work of saving a few.
It isn't a church that is wrong, my boy!
It isn't the church, it's you!”

Yes, you can help carry your share of responsibility of this great concern called “God and Company-Builders” by putting the church first in your life.

And then, you can contribute something for posterity by helping to make the church...

First in the lives of your children.

I'm speaking to the younger families of our church now... those of you who have growing children. Have you ever stopped to realize how incredibly important it is that your children be taught the right kind of religious habits as well as the right kind of hygiene habits?

We take a lot of time to see that our children get adequate rest, proper food, learn to brush their teeth at least twice today, but how many of us are willing to make the effort... the personal sacrifice... to see that our children grow up with the right kind of religious habits drilled into their very being?

Take the Hour of Power on Wednesday nights, for example. I know what a hassle it is to get the family together in church in the middle of the week. It's tough enough on Sunday morning. But if the future generation, your children and mine, are going to do a better job with this old world than we have done, then Christ and his church are going to have to have the preminent place in their lives.

And, as parents, it's our job... even though it's tough... to build into the lives of our children traditions and habits of church attendance... participation in its activities... interest in its concerns... so they grow up with the church at the center of their lives.

Oh, I know that when Mom's tired it's easier to stay home than to get the kids up and dressed and take them to Sunday School.

I know that when dad has worked all day it's tough to arouse him out of the easy chair and bundle the family off to church for our midweek Hour Of Power.

I know that when youngsters get excited it's hard to calm them down. But Lucille and I have found that, by being patient, after a few weeks our kids got used to the routine and now they are asleep as soon as their heads hit the pillow when we bring them home on Wednesday nights.

There are some things we *can't* do for our children. We can't decide what they're going to believe. Who they are going to marry. What their life work will be. These decisions will have to be made for themselves. But we *can* instill into them the habits of conduct, traits of character and the tradition of centering their life's activities in the church, so that later on, when they make these great decisions, they will make them within the context of their Christian training.

Last Friday and Saturday I was in Davenport, Iowa speaking to the Iowa Baptist Youth Convention. It was a great experience. Nearly 600 young people from all across the state were gathered there. One feature of the program in which I had a part was a panel discussion on the subject of morals. It was a free-wheeling discussion dealing with everything from the simple traits of honesty and courage down to such matters as drinking and boy-girl relationships.

After the panel had discussed the issues, the young people themselves were asked to make their comments... to tell how they were handling these particular problems. And I want you to know,

folks, if I ever had any doubts about the younger generation I lost them last Friday night. These kids weren't squares. Many of them were the leading youngsters in their schools.

I saw many block sweaters. I talked with the boy who led the entire state in points scored last basketball season. I met the fellow who was the leading hitter and pitcher of all the Iowa high school baseball teams. And, when one of the panel asked that teenage audience how they handled the problem of drinking and sex, one cute little gal who was student body president of her high school stood up and said,

“I’ve faced the same temptations that every kid in this room has faced. It hasn’t been easy. One night when the temptation was particularly great and I almost did something that was very wrong, I remembered something I had heard in my church: ‘your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit.’ I got to thinking about my church and how, because it is the house of God, I wanted it to be clean and pure and that since my body was the house of God, I’ve wanted it to be clean and pure, too..”

That wasn't a preacher talking. It was a lovely teenage girl who had discovered how important her childhood Christian training had become.

We got to talking about the herd instinct... the tremendous drive in teenagers to belong... to feel they are part of the gang. That's terribly important to youngsters at this particular time of life. The young man who led the state in hits this last baseball season got up and told how he discovered that if he wasn't willing to drink, smoke and do, as he put it, “a few other things”, he could not belong to certain groups. He was ostracized. He was left out.

He said,

“At first the need to belong was so tremendous I almost compromised my conviction. But I just couldn't get away from the things which had been instilled in me from the time I was little boy. So instead of turning away from my church, I've turned to it. I got active in my youth group and not only found a sense of belonging, I also found help and encouragement along the right road instead of

down the wrong road.”

When he set down there was a holy high silence on that audience of 600 high school kids as sacred and meaningful as any I have ever known. And, as I sat there in the silence that clung to our hearts for perhaps a half minute, I couldn't help but think: Suppose the parents of that boy hadn't taken the time or made the personal sacrifice to see that the teachings of the church, participation in its activities, attendance at its services was a habit, a tradition from which their son could not escape. What then?

I tell you, parents, when we brought our children into the world we accepted an awful responsibility. And it is dreadfully important that these junior partners in “God and Company-Builders” be trained from their infancy with habits and traditions which will put the church first in their lives.

And then let me say one last word. Not only can you contribute something to this great task of winning the world for Christ by putting the church first in your life and by instilling habits and traditions into the lives of your children so the church becomes first in their lives too, but also (and this is perhaps most important of all) by taking what you learn and receive here in church and plowing it in to...

The Life You Live Outside The Church.

Sometimes a minister wonders if he is really getting through. If anything is being accomplished by what he is trying to do. A couple of months ago I was sitting at my office. It was one of those days when you'd like to throw in the sponge. I call them “Aw nuts days.” Days when you just want to say, “Aw nuts, what's the use?”

The phone rang and one of our fine young businessmen said, “John, I have a problem. There's a Japanese man who needs a house to live in. He's a Christian, intelligent, good family man, but

none of the other realtors in the area will do anything for him. But I've got a Christian conscience that won't let me wash my hands of the deal. I've just got to find him a place to live. How do you think I ought to go about it?"

Well, I gave him what help I could, hung up the phone and said, "Thank you, Lord, I'm getting through." The interesting thing about it is that I've been here three-years and haven't preached a sermon on race relations yet. Even so, this young businessman, with a growing sense of Christian conviction and conscience, took something of the spirit of this church and plowed it back into his relationships with other people. When he did that, he did something significant for this enterprise in which we are all involved called "God and the Company-Builders."

Well, you have an area of influence to. And if we are going to win this world for Christ... if we are going to succeed in completing the task of the church... if we are going to build the Kingdom of God in the lives of people... than you and you and you must begin to translate what you hear, learn and feel on Sunday into what you think, say and do on Monday and every other day of the week.

Oh, I know you feel small and insignificant. It seems as if your one voice... your one vote... your one expression of conviction... your one helping hand extended to a fall on brother or sister seems so insignificant. In that regard may I share with you a bit of poetry which someone sent to me:

"I am only one, but I am one;
I can't do everything, but I can do something;
If I can do something, I should do something;
And if I should do something then, by the grace of God,
I will do something."

Beloved, you have a place in this firm called "God and Company-Builders" and it is a significant place. You have a job to do. A job that is distinctly yours. If you do not do it, it will not get

done.

You say you are afraid you'll fail? Well, just remember you're not in this thing alone. What you lack in strength, wisdom, courage and love...God will supply. For in the words of our text:

“We are laborers together with *God*.”

God is not a silent partner. He is not an absentee idler. There is a togetherness about it all. God is busy working too. He is changing chaos into unity... discord into harmony... darkness into light. He simply asks that we get under our share of the load.

A few years ago there was a great mass meeting in the Los Angeles Coliseum. Over 100,000 Christians of all denominations were gathered there that night. In the midst of the proceedings the lights of the Coliseum suddenly went out. The crowd was not prepared for it and as they were enveloped by the darkness, waves of fear swept across them. Then a voice was heard to say: “Don't be afraid. We turned them out on purpose.”

As the wave of nervous chatter from the audience subsided, the voice continued: “I want you to take a match. If you don't have one, borrow one from your neighbor. When I give this signal I want to light your match.”

There was a burst of good-natured banter as that crowd of 100,000 people sitting in total darkness fumbled through their pockets, purses or borrowed what was needed from a friend. Then, as silence settled upon the crowd again, the voice said: “Light your match.”

At first there was only a firefly of light here and there throughout the great Coliseum. Then, as if by magic, a giant jewel of light burst upon the vast arena... faded... and flickered out. As darkness descended once again the voice said, “Don't ever forget what you have seen and done tonight. You had just one small match and in this great sea of darkness it was nothing. But together with all the rest, it was much.”

Well, my friend, you are one life of purity liveing in a world of sin... your one light of love flickering in the darkness of hate... your one voice of witness in a babbling din of confusion... your one deed of goodness in a mad scramble of selfishness may seems small and insignificant.

But together with the life... the light... the voice... the deed of every other Christian it will make a difference. For we... you and I... and 600 million other Christians...

“we are laborers together with God”

and with God we cease to be a minority and become a majority.

Thank God for the church. Thank God for this church. Thank God for the great enterprise called “God and Company-Builders.” For it is this company that can change the world and this morning I urge you, as one of the partners in it, to

Give it first place in your life. Then make the sacrifices required to

Give it first place of the life of your child. So ultimately it shall be

Given first of the lives of all people everywhere.