

Little Hope or Big Hope?

FOUR STRATEGIC CHALLENGES

The following was a presentation to the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions on May 16, 2014, by State Missionary and Executive Director Rick Lance:

Little Hope Baptist Church was the reported name of a church a friend of mine saw on a road sign while traveling in the open country of east Texas. Like you, I smiled when I heard him tell about their experience. Yet, in many ways, this is not a humorous story but a serious one. I began asking myself some questions. Do we appear to be people of little hope in the world in which we live? Are we in a place of “little hope” as we face the ever-changing world around us?

Actually, for faithful followers of the living Lord, the world has always been adversarial to us. If you examine the Old Testament, as well as the New Testament, this becomes more of a reality. Israel faced captivity experiences in the Old Testament. The church was subject to persecution in the New Testament. Should we be surprised that we encounter hostility today?

Personally, I am encouraged by the brief story of the “men of Issachar” in I Chronicles 12:32. You may remember the huge compliment given to them as men who had an “understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do.”

This statement is steeped in the history of Israel. King Saul was in the waning days of his reign. He had been foolish and nonsensical in so many ways. A time of transition was in the works. Spiritual discernment was needed. A list of brave men of Israel, simply described as “the men of Issachar,” had attached themselves to David at Hebron and made him king in the place of the disgraced Saul.

Although not much is mentioned descriptively about the unnamed men, they did demonstrate spiritual discernment and practical statesmanship. At a time when people could have been described as being hopeless or exhibiting “little hope,” they understood the times, and they knew what Israel ought to do. They made the decision to elevate David to the throne and give guidance to the people of God.

Why do I allude to this brief text almost hidden in the pages of the Old Testament? My reasons are many. For some time, I have been burdened by what I see happening in our world. I have had my moments of despair. I have felt like a member of Little Hope Baptist Church. In my role as a state missionary, I have tried so much to read the times in which we live and to feel the pulse of our Baptist family. This had led me on an

interesting journey of faith. What I am about to share with you is neither new nor revolutionary but personal and practical in nature. Like you, I am seeking to understand the times and determine what I feel we need to do as a people. Some will say this is stating the obvious, and perhaps they are correct, because one does not have to be a prophet or a son of a prophet to read the situation in which we live. Others may think that my reflections are not complete or are even short-sighted. Again, I believe there is truth to that assessment.

However, I appeal to you to bear with me as I share some thoughts which have been incubating in my heart and germinating in my mind.

Cultural challenges

We face some cultural challenges. In our recent history as Alabama Baptists and Southern Baptists, we have had a front row seat in the convocation of welcomed participants in culture. We have had an audience, if not a profound impact, upon the shaping of cultural attitudes. You are not surprised to hear me say that we are now closer to the back row in the convocation of welcomed participants in the influencing of culture. Actually, that may be an optimistic appraisal.

One obvious example of this existing challenge is the changing views about marriage. Just a few years ago, every leading presidential candidate would have affirmed our understanding of the traditional view of marriage. Now leaders have expressed the notion that their attitudes and viewpoints have “evolved” into an acceptance of same-sex marriage. Polls taken in the United States, including the so-called Bible Belt, reflect those changes.

I was thinking about this situation recently, and I said to myself, “It seems to me someone just flipped a switch and cultural and political leaders changed their minds about marriage. It also appears that when the switch was flipped, the majority of people just changed their minds too.” This self-dialogue was followed by a conversation with a young pastor who said to me, “That battle is lost. That conversation is over.” We talked a little while longer about this and other issues but my contention was then, and it is now, that even if people feel the issue of a changed attitude toward marriage is settled, that does not mean we have to change our convictions. We can still hold high the view that marriage is to be defined as one man and one woman.

Even as I make these statements, I want to assure you that I believe in the guiding principle of Ephesians 4:15, “speaking the truth in love.” If you speak the truth alone, without love, you leave dead bodies everywhere. You cannot be an effective witness for Christ that way. If you speak only in love, without the truth, you are left compromised and essentially ineffective as salt and light in today’s culture.

The challenge we face in our cultural setting is to speak the truth in love concerning

every difference of opinion and viewpoint we have with those who disagree with us. Most of us are not called to be radio or television talk show hosts. We are called to be faithful witnesses for Christ, speaking His truth in His love! We cannot stand and shout at the darkness; we must shine our light in the midst of darkness.

Generational challenges

We face some generational challenges. Some of you might have heard me tell about an experience I had in one of our churches not long ago. I was there as a guest for some special occasion. To be honest, I cannot remember what the emphasis was for the day. The important takeaway I had from that visit was a moment of recognition the pastor offered before I preached. The pastor recognized a couple who were celebrating their 75th wedding anniversary. Of course, he asked the couple to stand, and they promptly did just that. With this recognition, the husband reached over and kissed his wife and everyone joyfully applauded. Then the pastor proceeded to recognize the other family members. There were five generations in the worship center and a sixth one in the preschool.

This literal evidence of the existence of multiple generations in our churches caused me to reflect a bit. One hundred years ago, no more than four generations would be represented in our churches or anywhere else. Today, we have a conglomeration of six or so generations seeking to live together. No wonder we have so many challenges before us generationally in our churches and in our culture.

Much attention is being given to the millennial generation and rightly so. In sheer numbers, the millennials are actually a larger segment of the population than the Baby Boomers. Although I do not profess to be an expert in generationalism, I have done some study of the multiple numbers of generations present today in our society. In some ways, this kind of study is mind-boggling. It is also confusing and elusive.

One obvious observation has been made concerning the millennials in that they are different from the other generations. Due to their numerical size, they will also have an enormous impact upon every aspect of the way we live as a society, including matters related to church life. Books, articles and studies conjecture that millennials are less church-going, more secular and inherently more suspicious of institutions than other generations. Without intending to be dismissive and cavalier about these observations, let me say that almost everything said about the millennial generation was also used as descriptive of the Baby Boomers who are advancing through the stages of life. They were the anti-establishment generation who marched on Washington and other places as a protest against the Vietnam War and the American government.

Considering this generational challenge, I was encouraged by a book written by Gallup researcher Frank Newport, who seemed to have a different take on generationalism. His contention is that as a generation ages and matures through the stages of life, the people

not only take with them their cohort traits, but they also assume some of the same characteristics of the generations which preceded them. Newport's book, *God Is Alive and Well: The Future of Religion in America* (New York: Gallup Press, 2012), is an excellent resource for studying generations with respect to faith, and I recommend it. It might well be a voice of encouragement to you.

Congregational challenges

We face some congregational challenges. Church planting is receiving enormous attention in our convention life and for very good reasons. Church planting has always been a means of reaching people for Christ and fulfilling the Great Commission around the world. A study of our history as Baptists will add credence to this assertion. Church planting is an essential strategy for us as we seek to be on mission with the Great Commission in a world starving for the Good News about our Lord Jesus Christ.

My concern relates to the need to have a balance in our emphasis so that we include church revitalization as a major focus of energies. I will not waste your time by repeating statistics pertaining to the number of churches at a plateau point or in a state of decline. You are already familiar with them. I will offer one perspective on the subject which I believe deserves attention. The percentage of our churches in the SBC and in our state convention that report data on the Annual Church Profile has declined over the years. In Alabama, the statistics are most telling. Take the year 1996 for an example: It was a time when 97 percent of our churches turned in a church profile that year. In 2006, the percentage of churches reporting ran at 90 percent. Last year, the percentage declined to 83 percent. A germane question is: How can we really know the numerical condition of our churches if we do not have the information used for such research?

Another valid point which needs to be made is that a numerical metric is not the only means of measuring the health of churches. There are other ways to determine the overall health of churches, including: Are they reproducing other churches? Are they a church planting church?

Your State Board of Missions is taking our responsibility in church revitalization very seriously, having been in the process of being trained as church revitalization coaches. We are also doing a pilot project with pastors across our state seeking to help pastors become healthy and renewed, so that their churches have better opportunities for church revitalization.

Allow me to make this appeal. Please pray for this church revitalization effort. Furthermore, help the cause by being a voice of encouragement to pastors and churches in your area.

I would be glad to see the day when those churches that, for whatever reasons, decide to close their doors also decide to let the Lord replant a church in their facilities and in their

area. If property is sold, I would like to see the day when more proceeds are given to church planting funds that would be used to start new churches somewhere in Alabama, North America or internationally.

I have lived to see the day when we have had such a flight out of urban areas in Alabama and North America that now we have to start all over securing property or places for new churches to begin their ministries. Had we had the foresight to take this approach decades ago, when churches in inner cities were closing their doors, we could have had more resources to use today. That is history. We cannot change history, but what about the future?

Missional challenges

In addition to cultural and generational challenges, we also confront some missional challenges. I use the word “missional” because it seems to be the term of choice today which describes what Alabama Baptists have called ONE MISSION, THE GREAT COMMISSION! I am comfortable with the term, but I do not use it exclusively.

In every generation there have been missional challenges. William Carey faced them in his day. Our spiritual ancestors in the Southern Baptist Convention confronted their own challenges. In fact, the Cooperative Program was born out of an effort to deal with what is known as the societal method of missions. Picture the scene as described in *Our Cooperative Program* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1965), authored by W. E. Grindstaff:

“Go back to the 1925 SBC meeting in Memphis, Tennessee. ‘Mr. President, Mr. President!’ Three voices spoke almost as one. ‘Mr. President, do I have the floor?’ The president’s gavel hammered vigorously. ‘The chair recognizes Brother Stealey.’ ‘Mr. President, we must settle this evolution issue at once.’ Clarence Stealey said, ‘This is the most pressing matter before us in 1925. Brother Burts’ report can come later.’

‘Mr. President!’ shouted Bronson Ray taking advantage of Stealey’s pause. At this point, Bronson Ray began to appeal to the messengers of the convention to hear the report from Charles Burts, who had been standing on the platform for some time waiting to make his presentation. Looking across the room filled with messengers in a crowded hall, devoid of air conditioning, Burts made a report which was history making. Near the conclusion of his presentation, he declared, ‘From the adoption of this report it shall be known as the Cooperative Program.’”

From that seminal moment forward, Southern Baptists began a march through history addressing their missional challenges with a unified budget built on the concept of personal stewardship of God-given resources, the autonomy of the local church and a partnership between state conventions and the Southern Baptist Convention. This God-blessed channel of giving through the Cooperative Program has served Southern Baptists well for almost 90 years. From this point, Southern Baptists have seen the Cooperative Program as the churches' preferred channel to give through it, not to it, as a foundation to support and nurture missions efforts. The authorized special offerings are the individuals' way of giving an added blessing to those efforts. By special offerings, I mean the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering for International Missions, as well as other approved offerings.

A few years ago, I was asked by a pastor to come and speak to his church about the Cooperative Program. Before I spoke to his people, the pastor said to me: "May I tell you my story?" Of course, I responded in the affirmative. I thought he was going to give me his salvation testimony. What he did was to tell me how he became a Southern Baptist. For the next few minutes, I stood in amazement as I listened to a man offer the best testimony of how, as a minister of the Gospel, he came to believe in the way we do missions. He described how, as a missionary in another type Baptist group, he spent six months of the year raising money in order to serve in his field the next six months. Now in his sixties, in a bivocational pastorate, the man said, "I became a believer in the way Southern Baptists do missions together. It is not perfect, but it is the best way I have ever seen."

I do not remember much I said that night, but I recall very well what that pastor said to me. He encouraged and informed me more than I could ever encourage and inform his people. I thanked him profusely. I wish I had an iPhone back then, because I would have taken his picture and posted it on Facebook and Twitter.

In every generation, there are critics of the Cooperative Program. That is nothing new. When I first became a pastor, I knew many independent Baptists who boasted how many missionaries their church supported. I just smiled and thought to myself how many thousands of missionaries and others my church helped to support. A few of those independent Baptists are now Southern Baptists who are involved in giving through the Cooperative Program. I will not name them publicly, but I know them personally.

Hardly any church could be effective without a unified budget. In fact, I cannot think of a pastor who would advocate such an approach. As a pastor, I did not always like everything in the unified budget, but I always appreciated the fact that we as a church family were doing this together.

I began making a list of words and phrases we have almost forgotten. I will not name all the words or phrases, but one is most germane to this discussion. Listen to it again: "We

can do more together than we can do separately.” That brief phrase has often been used in the content of our understanding of the Cooperative Program. We have believed throughout the years that we can do more, and be more effective in working together and giving together than we can going our own way. To go our own way is like the book of Judges: “Everyone did what was right in their own eyes.”

This is a matter of conviction with me. It is one of our core values. Cooperation has been in our DNA as Southern Baptists and Alabama Baptists, and it needs to be the case in the future. The alternative to this cooperative approach is to default back into a pre-1925 way of missions and ministry. The difference will be in that we will have known better. Before 1925, cooperation between autonomous Southern Baptist churches looked more like a quasi-independent Baptist model. We can do better than that. We have done better than that. We must continue the pathway of cooperation, because truly we can do more together than we can separately.

Sometimes I hear the critique of the way we support missions or placing too much emphasis upon structure. Perhaps there is some merit to that opinion. If that is the case, let me remind you that your State Board of Missions has reduced its employee number by one third. All of this was done without holding a press conference or having mass layoffs. A ministry audit approach for every position and every ministry was used. This is still an operating principle. We will be good stewards of the resources given to us.

Let me make one observation about structure. It is one I have offered to those who have brought the matter to my attention in the past. Structure to the cooperative people of God, like Southern Baptists and Alabama Baptists, is like the skeleton to the human body. There has to be a skeleton for the human body to be viable. The ministries of the structure represent the function of the human body. The heart of it all would be the One Mission we have in the Great Commission.

The missional challenges we face have to be confronted together. We cannot become Lone Rangers in a world needing the combined efforts and resources of the people of God called Southern Baptists and Alabama Baptists. Way too much is at stake for us to succumb to the temptation to go it alone, or to go with those folks we like or who like us. The Navy Seals are known for the statement, “Under pressure, you do not rise to the occasion; rather you sink to your level of training.” For us, we could say that under pressure, we do not rise to the occasion but rather reflect our level of togetherness and partnership.

Other evangelicals share many of our doctrinal beliefs. They are conservative orthodox followers of Christ. They do good work in the name of Jesus. However, one of our distinctives as Southern Baptists and Alabama Baptists has been that we do together for the cause of Christ. If we lose that distinctive, I believe we have fallen short of our God-given potential.

“Our hope is built upon nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness. On Christ the solid Rock we stand, on Christ the solid Rock we stand! All other ground is sinking sand. On Christ the solid Rock we stand!”

With this “Living Hope,” we can become 21st century people of Issachar “who have an understanding of the times.” We are seeking God’s wisdom to know how to do His will and to serve Him for the glory of God no matter what happens. David was their king. The Lord Jesus Christ is our King, and He will be our guide through the challenging times.