

"A View from Washington"

Stan Hastey column for April 2, 1992, issue of **Baptists TODAY**

More on Courage

Few pieces I've written have elicited the reaction, much of it negative, as that occasioned by my Feb. 6 column on this page, "Profiles in Courage." From the mail I've received and anecdotal reports, some denominational workers and seminary professors -- many of whom I am privileged to call friends -- felt my listing of former SBC administrators who gave up their jobs or suffered financial cut-offs for not buckling under to hostile trustees demeaned them.

Such emphatically was not my intent. While I could try to defend the piece by pointing to those qualifying words and phrases journalists learn to use to cover themselves, the simple fact is that if a writer communicates quite the opposite of what s/he intended, that writer has failed to make the point. So let me try again.

By listing those treated most egregiously, I did not mean in any way to diminish, let alone denigrate, those who have chosen to stay in their posts for reasons of conscience, reasons they alone know fully, reasons they need not justify to me or anyone else. To affirm the priesthood of all believers means in part to respect the freedom of every person faced with the hard choice of leaving or staying in a difficult situation.

Beyond that, the particularities of every person's own circumstances demand a common respect of the right to make such decisions free from judgment, especially that of friends. As my

friend Dan Martin has said, it is not so much the arrows of known enemies that pierce the soul's armor, but those of supposed friends.

These things I truly believe, and nothing I have written about the regrettable absence of leadership in the old convention has been intended to impugn anyone's motives.

Yet to affirm all this does not negate the right -- even the responsibility -- to raise hard questions about leaders who refuse to lead. This is the other issue I sought to surface in the earlier column, albeit by indirection. So this time I'll be more direct.

Why did so many of our top agency administrators try to finesse their way through the inerrancy thicket by playing word games with fundamentalists? Did they not understand they were contesting people who rival the Pharisees themselves at religious word games?

Why haven't our top administrators served notice on their overseers that if they dismiss people without cause they are, de facto, dismissing them as well? Why have they not given us a single "Saturday Night Massacre," such as that occasioned by Elliott Richardson and Bill Ruckleshaus when they refused to fire Archibald Cox on Richard Nixon's orders?

Why have so many of our leaders chosen to accommodate themselves to a regime that aims to destroy them rather than casting their lot with those who for so long believed in and sustained them?

And why have they not joined these supporters in the daring effort to usher in a new and more promising day for free and faithful Baptists?

In short, why have so many of our leaders abdicated their responsibility to lead?

More important than these questions, given the distance we've traveled, is another one: "Does any of this matter any longer?"

Yes, it does, because it is not yet too late to do something about past miscalculations and mistakes. There is yet time to get on with the new thing God is doing among us rather than continuing to seek accommodation with the old order.

But the window of opportunity is narrow. That much I know I said clearly in the earlier piece.

And yes, in our Baptist system, the ultimate responsibility really does rest with congregations and their pastors. On that I will insist, in spite of the reaction of one pastor who castigated the piece as "a hollow cry for courage from a 'safe' position...."

Here is the plain truth. None of us in the Alliance or the Fellowship or any of those other new causes that have sprouted up has a chance to make much of a difference unless the churches give us permission. In our system, under our polity, that is the way it is.

And many of the churches will have little chance to grant that permission unless their pastors are willing to take risks

for the sake of the new thing God is trying to do among us. In taking such risks, some courageous pastors have lost their jobs. Others will as well. Prophets never have been guaranteed job security.

But the good news out in the churches is that many more of our people than some had thought are waiting and willing to be led. They want to know the truth. They reflect the mood of the American electorate in this most dismal of political seasons in that they want their leaders to lay out before them the way things really are. "We can handle the bad news," they are saying, "but first we've got to hear it."

So the urgent question for those remaining Southern Baptist leaders -- administrators and pastors alike -- who still can make a difference is, "Can real leaders do anything less?"