

# Baptist Student Union and the Church – “Living Stones”

By Larry Justice

A teacher once asked her pupils to bring something to Sunday School which would remind them of Jesus and of what they could do for Him. One girl brought a loaf of bread. The teacher praised her, saying, “Yes, this shows that Jesus is the bread of life. We must go and tell people with hungry souls about Him.” A second girl brought a match, whereupon the teacher responded, “This also reminds us of Jesus. As the light of the world, we must let Him shine through us to others.” Everyone in the class was surprised when a little boy put a bantam egg in the teacher’s hand. “Tell us what this egg means?” the teacher inquired. The little boy responded, “Well, my little hen couldn’t produce anything very large, but she did what she could. I’m too small to do great things for Jesus, but I intend to do my best.”<sup>1</sup> The Church needs those who will realize that individually they are relatively insignificant but when they are doing their best, in combination with other Christians who are, likewise, doing their best, they are extremely strong; i.e., Stones without mortar are by themselves insignificant and lacking in strength; bound together with good cement they have the strength to withstand almost any force.

This is the concept Peter (I Peter 2:4-10) and Paul (Ephesians 2:19-22) are expressing when they speak of the Church as “living stones” aligned with “The Cornerstone”, who is Jesus Christ. He is the “plumb” by which the foundation of Old Testament Prophets and New Testament Apostles laid the true alignment of each “living stone.” Living stones constitute the very composition of the walls of the Church of our living God.

## Exegesis

Peter and Paul convey one of the most powerful concepts of the Church that can be found in the scriptures; Christians have become “living stones” aligned by **The** “Living Stone”—Jesus Christ, the Cornerstone. Paul’s letter to the Ephesians emphasized that Jesus Christ came bringing peace,

unity and harmony to a world in which man was separated from man, ideologically, theologically, nationally and racially. His readers became the most victimized by these conditions for they were uncircumcised Gentles, "strangers and aliens" who occupied a class no better than a slave.

Apparently Peter and Paul were aware of one another's teaching of Christ as the Cornerstone and Christians as "living stones." Paul introduces his concept of "living stones" with man being at odds with his fellowman and the Father. Peter introduces his teachings with "urgings": (1) "strip-off" evil, for evil weakens the very fibers of the "living stones;" (2) "yearn for" or "crave" pure spiritual milk since it is the primary and basic substance of the Christian life (see Hebrews 5:12 & 6:2).

Paul's emphasis in Ephesians 2:19-22 is upon the "fellow citizen with the Saints." (KJV) No more were they to consider themselves as "foreigners or persons excluded from civil right;" i.e., relegated to a place of inferiority, inferior even to slaves. In the presence of Jesus Christ, everyone of them could have a seat and place, equal in significance. No one was excluded who desired a place at the Father's table. They found themselves to be the very **make-up** of th Church, the very stones of the superstructure resting upon the foundation of the Old Testament Prophets and the New Testament Apostles, **together**.

The superstructure and the firm foundation are both aligned with the "foundation stone" or "cornerstone". The cornerstone does not bear the weight of the building but, more importantly, aligns the superstructure and foundation which bear the weight of one another; i.e., brick upon foundation and stone upon stone. Lenski says that, "There is not a single line or an angle in this building that is not determined by this stone . . ." <sup>2</sup> ". . . The glory of the Christian temple is eternal and real, not mere idolatrous gaud."<sup>3</sup> The uniqueness of this concept is that the structure is yet to be completed; daily new stones are added. The structure is vibrant, alive, animate, both a temple and a habitation.<sup>4</sup> This is a structure of work, not a resort house. God **harmoniously** (Williams) fits the stones together, each into its own place, **exactly**, with no stone being more prominent than any other.

Peter's emphasis in I Peter 2:4-7 is upon encouraging "babes" to be more than milk drinkers. These "babes" must become more than a house, that is, they must be a house of priests; holy in all conduct, respectful of God, bound in love and dedication to the study of the Word. This will be the hedge against the ultimate rejection by men, which even the Living Stone himself endured.

The priest is a "living stone". He is a pontifex—a bridge builder. Upon him rests the weight of other Christians, all seeking to be aligned with the Cornerstone. He is also responsible for bringing an offering—himself. He, therefore, becomes a part of the wall of defense for the Church. The defense walls of the ancient Greek city-state of Sparta were described by a general who states, "These are the walls of Sparta, and every man of them a brick."<sup>5</sup> The walls of the Church are no different; Christian individual priests—living stones—compose the walls of defense and shelter for the permanent dwelling place of the Father.

Lenski sums up these teachings of Peter and Paul by comparing the Jewish Temple and the Church made of living stones:

1. The Jews had a house of God, Christians are the house of God.
2. The Temple was made of dead stones, Christians are living stones.
3. The Jews approached God through a Priest, Christians are priests.
4. The Jews offered material sacrifices, the Christians are purely spiritual.<sup>6</sup>

### **Becoming "Living Stones"—the BSU and the Church**

The instrument used to provide the unity, harmony and fellowship found in Christ Jesus is the Church and Baptist Student Union is a part of that instrument. Without the Church, the BSU cannot exist. Without the BSU, the Church is missing a vital link in the development of complete and living stones.

But what is BSU? The campus minister might say that it is a place of equipping college students through fellowship, study, mission awareness, and so on. One individual has said that BSU is just an exaggerated Sunday School class. Another stated it is a nine-month Vacation Bible School. A

student might say that BSU is everything the church isn't. But what is BSU? According to the BSU Guidebook, BSU is:

The Christian witness of Southern Baptist work in all institutions of higher learning is in response to our Lord's command to make known the gospel to all men.

This witness is an integral part of the nature and mission of the church. The role of the churches is indispensable to the maturing spiritual, moral, and intellectual lives of students and faculty members.

Because the university is engaged in the search for truth, of which God is the source, the Christian perspective is essential to the realization of the ultimate purpose of higher education.

The unique nature of the university situation demands a specialized ministry by our denomination to the individuals, in the campus community with their need for redemption and Christian nurtures.<sup>7</sup>

BSU is a place—a building and concept. It is a place where students can meet other students. It is a place where students can worship, fellowship, mature and experience all segments of the emotional spectrum and realize that they are a part of a community, a community in which others are experiencing and enduring the same joys and sorrows. BSU is a place where members of a highly specialized academic society can share in one another's failures and successes. BSU is a place in which church involvement is taught as being indispensable; therefore, the student can become a main avenue through whom God can reach the college campus.

### **BSU and the Church — A Community**

To be true to the Bible, you have to reject the American presupposition that individualism is superior to community: ". . . whenever a person becomes involved with God, he simultaneously becomes involved with other people."<sup>8</sup> Individualism in the Church is important **only** in respect to a person's relationship to the Father. But individualism stops there. The Church must rely upon the community of believers working hand-in-hand and shoulder-to-shoulder to gain the most effective results for the Kingdom. "The freelance Christian, who would be a Christian but is too superior to belong to the visible Church upon earth in one of its forms, is simply a contradiction in terms."<sup>9</sup> BSU must be in the business of involving students in the community—the Church,

yes, even the Church "in one of its forms."<sup>10</sup> Encouraging student involvement in the life and work of a local church (even if it isn't Baptist) is an integral part of BSU. As the church gathers, ". . . students engage further in those disciplines that generate an answer to the question 'Who am I?'"<sup>11</sup>

BSU and the Church have a unique opportunity to work together to help students be an integral part of community and discover who they are. Students need to know that the Church cares, that the Church needs them and wants them. By the same token, churches need to feel the students want to be involved; that students can and want to be involved in the total ministry of the Church. The BSU and the Church must recognize "the unique place each organization holds in the student's life. Each must appreciate the other and its integrity for it to work."<sup>12</sup> BSU and the Church are community and as community each can meet students' needs. In the BSU, students can realize the cohesiveness of the smaller part of the community of faith. In the Church, students can realize their part in the larger Christian community.

### **BSU and the Church — Problem Areas<sup>13</sup>**

The community of faith is not immune from problems, however. Duplication of programs and emphases is inevitable. This results from the fact that both BSU and the Church may fail to recognize their place in ministry. Each is important, but in its own area. The Church cannot be the BSU and vice versa. Duplication comes as a result of both the BSU and churches "vying for students' support, loyalty and time."<sup>14</sup> churches need to realize that "students are people, too, with needs to be met."<sup>15</sup> BSU's can help this situation by assisting churches in planning activities together in accordance with the BSU and student schedules. But, on the other hand, the duplication issue is encouraged by the concept students have that "all churches are alike and full of hypocrites." Students do not get this idea on their own; it has been passed on as long as the Church has existed. BSU can help by teaching the purpose of the Church as well as the fact that just as the Church is flawed and imperfect, so is everyone else, including students. However, "it is still God's people, in just the same way that you, in spite of your failures, are God's child. God has not rejected the Church, and neither should we."<sup>16</sup>

As one pastor stated, duplication is inevitable but not necessarily wrong. Duplication can be a way of providing harmony through re-emphasizing and repeating important doctrines and teachings for better learning. The best way to overcome duplication of programs or ideas between the BSU and local churches, as well as overcome the problems which will follow, is by good communication.

A predominate concern of many pastors is that the church and/or the BSU tend to see self as an entity independent of the other. The result is not seeing the big picture of making disciples. It must be remembered, as previously stated, that we are speaking of community and success within a community comes as a result of communication.

Another problem is helping the parents of BSU students realize that the religious experience of a student may have changed significantly while in college. The BSU and the Church can work together to help the parent realize that their "word is no longer considered the authoritative work or even the last word on a belief."<sup>17</sup> For the parents who are pillars of strength in the local church, it is hard to relate to a young person who returns home at the end of the Freshman year and states that he is now an atheist. Just as difficult is the attempt by parents who are occasionally involved in the church to understand a student who has become deeply involved in Christianity through the BSU Bible studies or has decided to spend a summer working in inner city Chicago as a BSU Summer Missionary rather than work on the farm. The parents must be helped in realizing that college is a time of adjusting, questioning, experimenting and making decisions which will affect the student's life, hopefully for the better. Together the BSU and Church can meet this need.

Another existing problem area relates to funding. One pastor states: "I believe we are on a collision course within our state convention regarding local funding versus the Cooperative Program." Has "Old Betsy" ceased to produce milk? Has the "old spring out back" run dry? Is there a point where budgets cannot be increased anymore? Yearly, BSU's, associations, the Cooperative Program and our BSU mission groups seek to get more and more financial support from our churches. How long can this continue? We may not have the

answers but through better communication we can overcome the impending shock of someone saying, "Sorry, we cannot increase our support of the BSU this next year."

### **BSU and the Church — A Success Story**

Even though potential problems exist in the BSU-Church relationship, this relationship continues to be one of the greatest success stories of Southern Baptists. In Oklahoma alone, Baptist churches, through the Cooperative Program and local funding, supported student work to the tune of one million dollars in 1981 plus \$90,000 raised by BSU students toward the support of summer missionaries and student work in pioneer mission areas. This is the result of the blessings and leadership of the Holy Spirit and the fact that churches continue to believe in BSU.

But the success story doesn't end there. Many churches in university communities provide an excellent "Adopt-a-Student" or "Home-Away-From-Home" program to help students feel as if they are needed and wanted in the local church setting. Other churches provide a "Friendship International House" at Christmas for those international students who are unable to return to their homeland. This is done in the conviction that the best missionaries are those who return to their homeland, following graduation, with more than a degree; i.e., faith in Christ Jesus. Still other churches join with BSU students in their outreach programs, the results being students won to the Lord because of a visit from a deacon in a local church.

But the BSU-Church relationship is broader than these examples. BSU students in a Texas university have joined with a church in renovating a house for a Vietnamese family. Other BSU students in Oklahoma volunteer to paint and re-shingle small rural churches. And BSU students join with a church in Louisiana to conduct clean-up exercises and revival services in small churches in the southern part of that state.

### **Concluding Statements**

The secret of BSU-Church relationship must be found in scripture. Peter and Paul speak of "living stones" aligned with the "Cornerstone—Jesus Christ" and being based upon the prophets of the Old Testament and the apostles of the

New Testament. Churches must realize that the BSU exists to help students become living stones just as much as the forty-year Christian. BSU must exist to help students realize that through Jesus Christ, they become as "living stones" in the body of Christ and the Church. They come not as mature, super-Christians, but they come even as the little bantam hen, with the best they have—themselves. BSU and the Church: "community of confessing Christians, for all its faults, is the people of God."<sup>18</sup>

### Footnotes

- 1 Bosch, Henry G., "Our Daily Bread," Grand Rapids, Michigan: Radio Bible Class (1980).
- 2 Lenski, R. C. H., **The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Ephesians**, (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Publishing House, 1937), pp. 455.
- 3 Jamieson, Robert, A. R. Faussett, and David Brown, **Commentary Practical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible**, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1961), p. 1286.
- 4 Vaughn, W. Curtis, **The Letter to the Ephesians**, (Nashville, Tennessee: Convention Press, c-963), pp. 63-65.
- 5 Barclay, William, **The Letters of James and Peter**, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), p. 231.
- 6 Lenski, R. C. H., **The Interpretation of the Epistles of St. Peter, St. John, and St. Jude**, (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Publishing House, 1966), pp. 82-96.
- 7 **Baptist Student Union Guidebook**, (Nashville, Tennessee: The Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1976), p. 9.
- 8 Humphreys, Fisher, "Building on the Rock," **The Student**, (Nashville, Tennessee: The Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, October, 1976), p. 11.
- 9 Cranfield, C. E. B., and William Barclay, **The Letters of James and Peter**, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), p. 231.
- 10 **Ibid.**
- 11 **Baptist Student Union Guidebook**, (Nashville, Tennessee: The Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1976), p. 11.
- 12 Letter from Dr. James E. Carter, Pastor, University Baptist Church, Ft. Worth, Texas, April, 1981.
- 13 In the course of gathering information for this article BSU directors and pastors, some from university towns and some from non-university towns, were asked to give some problem areas of BSU-Church relationships.
- 14 Letter from Dr. James E. Carter, Pastor, University Baptist Church, Ft. Worth, Texas, April, 1981.
- 15 Survey on **An Analysis of Students Who Are Active in BSU and of Churches to Which They Have and Do Relate**, (National Student Ministries, Nashville, Tennessee).
- 16 Humphreys, Fisher, "Building on the Rock," **The Student**, (Nashville, Tennessee: The Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, October, 1976), p. 13.
- 17 Carter, James E., "When a College Student Questions Family Beliefs," (unpublished manuscript, Nashville, Tennessee: Church Administration, The Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1981), p. 4.
- 18 Humphreys, Fisher, "Building on the Rock," **The Student**, (Nashville, Tennessee: The Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, October, 1976), p. 13.