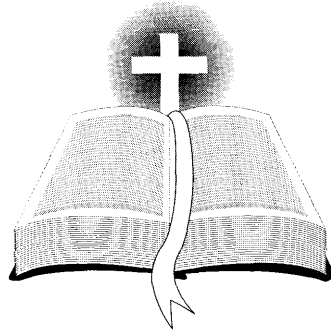


CHAPTER ONE



A NATION IN NEED OF MESSENGERS OF HOPE

It was a warm May day in Washington, D.C., as I sat among seven hundred other specially invited guests in the rotunda of our nation's Capitol Building. Before congressional, diplomatic, and religious leaders, Dr. and Mrs. Billy Graham were about to be presented with the Congressional Gold Medal. Rising to receive this honor, Dr. Graham's words of acceptance were unexpected by many sitting before him. In contrast to the ceremony and self-congratulations that accompany so many occasions of man honoring man, his message cut swiftly through pomp. In a brief speech entitled "The Hope for America," he said:

During this century we have witnessed the outer limits of human evil. Our mood on the brink of the twenty-first century is far more somber. . . . there is much about America that is no longer good. You know the problems as well as I do: racial and ethnic tensions that threaten to rip apart our cities and neighborhoods, crime and violence of epidemic proportions in most of our cities, children taking weapons to school, broken families, poverty, drugs, teenage pregnancy, corruption, the list is almost endless. . . . We have confused liberty with license—and we are paying the awful price. We are a society poised on the brink of self destruction. . . . What is the cure? Is there any hope? *Yes. There is hope!* Our lives can be changed and our world can be

changed. . . . if ever we needed God's help, it is now. If ever we needed spiritual renewal, it is now.¹

In that one moment, two things were clearly illustrated. We are a nation in desperate need of hope. And the time has come to flood the land with many messengers of hope.

A World Bereft of Hope

Samuel Johnson noted, "Hope is the chief happiness which this world offers." What kind of hope does our world offer our generation right now? According to Bill Gates's inaugural book, *The Road Ahead*, we can anticipate a world dominated by extraordinary technological advances. He is convinced these will make all of us smarter, happier, faster, and better. Much of this hope for him, of course, is linked to the success of an "Information Super-highway."²

Evangelical statesman and theologian Carl F. H. Henry, however, sees it differently. He says we live in "a world bereft of hope."³ Many are inclined to agree. From his years of travel in mass evangelism, Luis Palau notes that "a spirit of despondency lies over the nation. We've lost hope."⁴ Chatting with former Secretary of Education William Bennett, Chuck Colson was asked: "Tell me, can you name one positive trend in our culture?" Colson was caught by surprise. After a few moments of silence he had to admit that he was not able to come up with even a single hopeful cultural indicator.⁵

This blanket of hopelessness may relate, in part, to America's frantic pace of life, directly responsible for increases in hypertension, heart disease, and psychological disabilities such as depression. Many of us are simply overwhelmed by the amount of information we're required to process and use daily. It is estimated that human knowledge is expanding at the rate of six hundred million words *each hour!*⁶ Keeping up in even a small way leaves us little time to reflect on the present, let alone dream great expectations for the future. One-quarter of Americans say that they feel utterly exhausted, frazzled by the lack of time, and literally on the breaking point. Burnout!⁷ We are physically and emotionally depleted. What kind of hope can a person in that condition muster?

Other plagues on our society also continue to rob us of hope.

The crime rate has increased nearly 1,000 percent since 1950, with a 560 percent increase in violent crime since 1960.

One in five Americans is infected with an incurable sexually transmitted disease, the fruits of a borderless hedonism. (Be merry—tomorrow we die! What hope is that?)

Depletion of the ozone, the possibly disastrous greenhouse effect, and other environmental disruptions are now major concerns.

The diminishing of the value of human life is obvious in what many term “killing for convenience”—abortion, assisted suicides, euthanasia, fetal tissue research.

The erosion of trust and growing disillusionment toward political, religious, and other leadership in our land causes us to despair. How can we have hope when those leading us into the future have so often failed to earn our confidence?

The general erosion of our inner cities, with its resulting ravages on interpersonal relations causes millions of urban Americans to have a pervasive sense of loneliness and isolation.

One bastion of hopelessness is found among the thirty-six million Americans living in poverty. That number is equivalent to every man, woman, and child in the twenty-five largest cities—one out of every seven Americans. It includes twelve million kids who suffer from chronic daily hunger, over 330,000 of whom are homeless.

In fact, the polarization of rich and poor, with the unabated retreat of the middle class, is one of the major sources of fearfulness in America. Long-range projections of scarcity and downward mobility, especially for those considered affluent till now, have seriously undermined confidence in the economic future. It is estimated, for example, that the income of U.S. workers has declined 13 percent over the last two decades. One of our recent labor secretaries calls these Americans the “anxious class.”

Instead of hopefulness we feel a pervasive sense of discontent, rising out of the fruitless pursuit of the American dream, which for most of us is fast becoming an illusion.⁸ Wrestling with accumulation in a culture of compulsive consumerism fueled by dazzling

promises of technological advance delivered by sophisticated mass media marketing, many of us are left never truly satisfied and even further in debt than ever. By the turn of the century, an estimated four million Americans are expected to file personal bankruptcy each year. Our own government stares at a five-trillion-dollar debt, projected to be thirteen trillion by the early part of the twenty-first century unless there is a major turnaround.

Paradoxically, despite record prosperity, greater levels of anxiety are being experienced than ever before. Why? Because in the midst of our prosperity we see the future as a time when we may *lose* what we have; we are frozen with the fear that our life of affluence cannot possibly last—that everything is moving in reverse. Yes, we are the anxious class. We are also a nation bereft, in need of messengers of hope.

Deeper Sources of Hopelessness

Our despair rises from much deeper levels too. Social pathologies threaten the very foundation of our families. The divorce rate is at 50 percent, with dramatic rises in child and spousal abuse. Teenage suicide has increased 300 percent since 1940 and is now the second leading cause of death among teenagers. Many other teens are hospitalized for psychiatric treatment, jumping from sixteen thousand in 1980 to nearly three hundred thousand in 1995. Dysfunctional families will produce a new generation of people with negative self-image, pent-up anger, fear of intimacy, and distrust of all authority.

And yet, seven out of ten adults claim that if the traditional family unit falls apart, the stability of American society will collapse.⁹ Where can we find hope in such dismal projections?

These national trends are being magnified by “mega-trends” that only increase our sense of foreboding. From the evening news we hear reports of potential mega-famines, pandemics, global plagues, only increased by the multiplication of crowded mega-cities in the Two-Thirds World. Books and movies abound with worse-case scenarios—terrorism, technological piracies, holocausts, economic col-

lapse, even invasions by extraterrestrial beings! Says one European philosopher, “The modern crisis is increased and deepened by the growing sense of urgency, due to the feeling that time is running out.”¹⁰

Returning to our own shores, one of the most disheartening struggles of all is America’s current “culture wars.” One historian says what is at stake is nothing less than the future of our American democracy.¹¹ *U.S. News and World Report* writer John Leo claims that the driving theme for his hundreds of weekly columns has been the conviction “that millions of Americans are in shock and mourning at the cultural breakdown we see around us . . . every aspect of Western culture is under assault now.”¹² Instead of hope, we find (in the words of Supreme Court nominee Robert Bork) a growing climate of “low morale . . . loss of nerve, which cannot summon the will needed to engage all of these massive problems.”¹³

There you have it: a society gripped by fear of the future, a crisis of confidence, and chronic anxiety.¹⁴ We are plagued with pessimism, addicted to despair, infected with contagious cynicism, poisoned with an ingratitude that refuses to acknowledge the countless blessings we enjoy.¹⁵ Sometimes it does feel we should drape across New York harbor not the welcoming words of Miss Liberty to the nations but rather the warning Dante inscribed over his Inferno: “Abandon all hope all ye who enter here.”

Never has a nation stood in greater need of messengers of hope. Nothing else but hope from God can bring us out of our disenchantment over the past, our despondency over the present, and our confusion about the future.¹⁶ This familiar tune is being played all through our society. As Cal Thomas observes, “No generation of Americans has ever heard more extravagant promises. Promises of revolution. Promises of Utopia. Promises of ecstasy. Promises of justice.”¹⁷ Instead of engendering hope, these shattered promises have left many disillusioned, bitter, and emotionally bankrupt. Even more disheartening, government has channeled literally trillions of tax dollars toward this vast array of crises. In the end, however, it seems all we have done, in most cases, is make things worse. As Chuck Colson says, “We now know that 95% of the things that are ailing our country today, that most of us feel passionately about, are beyond the reach of government.”¹⁸

A Generation of Seekers

The emerging good news, however, is that in the face of social disarray, there is a growing hunger for spiritual reality. “No serious moral conservative doubts the severity of America’s cultural crisis. But just when time seems darkest, rays of light may be breaking through, creating a rare moment of opportunity for Christians,” writes Chuck Colson.¹⁹ Since spiritual impoverishment is the main ailment of our society, it is not hard for us to conclude that spiritual renewal is our greatest solution. If, in the words of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, our culture has been overtaken by “spiritual exhaustion,” then this is also a moment when, in the midst of despair, Americans may be actively looking as never before for a message that gives hope—not any hope, but the hope of true spiritual renaissance.²⁰

In fact, signs are everywhere that people are asking deeper questions such as, “Isn’t there something *more* than this?” and, “Is there something God has to say to us in the midst of it all?” For example, a recent survey among teenagers found that their single greatest concern is the decline in moral and social values, and that 70 percent believe that religion is meant to have a significant impact.²¹ Writes a baby buster in *Life after God*: “My secret is that I need God—that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I no longer seem to be capable of giving; to help me be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love.”²²

Think for a moment what a consensus of thought about God brought to previous generations of Americans. Not only did it provide the basis of our morality, it was also the basis of our hope. God was someone permanent to hold on to, a way of making sense out of our lives, a source of courage for the future. Currently many Americans, recapturing that vision, are transforming themselves into a “generation of seekers.”²³ Like the title of a public television series in 1996, we are increasingly “searching for God in America,” and this search could possibly drive the strongest U.S. religious revival we have ever seen.

Newsweek documents that 58 percent of our citizens feel the need to experience spiritual growth and are thus on a quest for spiritual

meaning, in pursuit of the truly sacred. Beginning the day with Prozac *and* prayer, many are expecting heaven to help make life livable again. As a matter of fact, many *are* praying (though understandings of prayer widely differ). In a recent survey it was found that 90 percent of Americans pray to God, 61 percent make specific requests, 60 percent do it daily, and nearly 50 percent also listen for and expect answers from God.²⁴

These people would probably concur with Shirley Dobson, chairperson of America's National Day of Prayer, that "our national problems are too overwhelming. They are problems of the heart, and only God can change the heart."²⁵ Looking out over this same landscape, Christian business leader John Beckett, a member of the National Prayer Committee, concludes: "Our hope is in God. Are we desperate enough to believe this? We have so many ideas and techniques. We are so comfortable with responses born out of tradition, out of 'experience.' Abandoning ourselves to Almighty God must become our first impulse . . . we have no other hope."²⁶

It is just such a time as this that French Christian philosopher Jacques Ellul wrote about thirty years ago in the book *Hope in Time of Abandonment*. He saw the spiritual crisis looming and predicted it would be a crisis of global proportions. He anticipated that Western societies would increasingly sense that our condition was evidence God had stepped back—that he had, in a sense, "abandoned" us to our own devices until we are ready to acknowledge that our hope is in him exclusively. Ellul's encouraging thesis is irrefutable: When nothing decisive is forthcoming out of all man's institutions, revolutions, and plans, then that puts us back again to the place where we are "waiting for something to happen, the something which will make us alive again. We have no more resource within ourselves."²⁷ Historically, that something has been revival! That's the hope such a time of abandonment requires, the hope God offers.

Campaigning for Christ

Nationally, then, a large audience is moving into this waiting state of mind. It is an audience especially prepared for the message of

hope—a hope centered on Christ, a hope that draws its framework from thousands of biblical promises, a hope that can be unleashed in an outpouring of the Holy Spirit for any generation that opens itself to receive it. With conviction born out of years of desperate longing for God’s breakthroughs in his own ministry, J. I. Packer interprets the contemporary drama this way:

To moderns drowning in hopelessness, disappointed, disillusioned, despairing, emotionally isolated, bitter and aching inside, Bible truth comes as a lifeline, for it is future-oriented and hope-centered throughout . . . the hope that the Scriptures bring us arrests and reverses the drowning experience here and now, generating inward vitality and renewed joy, and banishing forever the sense of having the life choked out of us as the waves break over us . . . the Bible throughout is a book of hope.²⁸

A nation drowning in hopelessness? Then we are a people in need of—and being primed for—this message. To expand on the water metaphor, now is clearly the time to flood our land with messengers of hope! I firmly believe the most strategic thing any of us can do for the advancement of Christ’s kingdom in this hour is to be a part of making this happen . . . beginning inside the church.

George Barna’s *Absolute Confusion* documents that our greatest need in churches called to minister to such a decaying nation is for strong, visionary leadership: “men and women who can envision the better future God wills for his people; who will motivate people to action; who will create intelligent plans for positive change; and who will spearhead the implementation of those plans, for the enduring glory of God.”²⁹ Are you willing to be one of those leaders? Are you willing to campaign throughout the nation for the hope of revival that Christ gives to, in, and through his church?

Consider a recent presidential campaign launched with bold headlines proclaiming, “Hope is back!” The next three months of political maneuvering were all designed to convince the American voter that this candidate’s party offered the greatest hope to our nation—a bridge into the twenty-first century. That’s the spirit with which political campaigns are waged.

Let's start a similar campaign. On behalf of the Lord Jesus Christ and the agenda of his kingdom, let's bring a revolutionary hope to the American people through a church that is itself already abounding in it. Political strategists see that America needs hope. Without the one true resource to bring it about, without any permanent hope of their own, they make multiple promises to achieve their own purposes. How much more should we, as children of the almighty God, be willing and active in freely, widely, and enthusiastically proclaiming a hope that has already been secured for us by the living Christ himself? God-given revival is the true bridge of hope into a twenty-first century more wonderful and power-filled than any of us can even imagine. Let's say so. Let's be God's agents to help build it.

True, America may be "slouching toward Gomorrah"; there is ample room for brooding pessimism if we allow it. But there is also room for hope, hope that is anchored in the gospel of Christ, hope that is backed by the Word of God. As Judge Bork concludes, "for the immediate future what we probably face is an increasingly vulgar, violent, chaotic, and politicized culture . . . the pessimism of the intellect tells us that Gomorrah is our probable destination. What is left to us is the determination not to accept that fate and the courage to resist it—the optimism of the will."³⁰

Across the land, messengers of hope have reached a similar determination. But they've done so with this caveat: We must not and will not accept a church stuck in a pre-revival condition. For them, the courage to resist the spirit of hopelessness so pervasive upon our land rises out of the revealed character, ways, and promises of God in Jesus Christ. To make a difference, they have chosen to proclaim the one message that can transform the future. Contrary to Bork's conclusion, theirs is not simply an "optimism of the will." It is so much more. Theirs is (as Billy Graham told us in the rotunda) a hope for America that arises out of the prospects of spiritual rebirth—personal, corporate, national. We're talking about nothing less than a full-blown spiritual awakening to Christ, and to Christ alone!

Could *you* be one of these messengers of hope? Absolutely.

Descend! descend! Thou gracious God of Heaven!
And with Thy glory fill this beauteous fan;
Descend! and let Thy mercy here be giv'n;
Descend! and let Thy statutes here obtain.
O, *here*, the mantle of Thy love outspread,
And let Thy richest blessings *here* be shed.

Here may the light of holy truth dispel
The moral darkness of the human mind,
Defeat the combined power of earth and hell,
And achieve all the heart of Christ design'd;
Here let the dews of Christian love distill.
And peace divine each faithful bosom fill.

Speak here, great Savior, and the blind will see;
The deaf will hear, the dumb will sing Thy praise. . . .

Redeemer! may the cause of missions here,
Receive a high, a most exalted place,
And many a herald go from hence to bear
The joyful message of redeeming grace. . . .

*Here may the heralds of salvation be
A spotless priesthood, and from error free.*

Daniel Alexander Payne,
"A Sacred Ode: A Prayer
for the Consecration of a Pulpit" (1866),
taken from *Conversations with God:
Two Centuries of Prayers by African-Americans*