

Speech before Texas Rural Pastors Conference

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American freedom is based upon a sincere faith in God and in Christianity. Today we are in trouble largely because our leaders have abandoned that faith, and because the people themselves have neglected the church and the eternal truths that the Bible teaches. Nationally, we have fallen into a state of moral and spiritual decay that is much more dangerous to our welfare than the soil erosion that has destroyed much of our land.

The birth, life and teachings of Christ add up to the greatest force and influence for human progress that the world has ever known. Christianity has been the light to brighten our path for 2,000 years. Today, with conflicting ideologies confronting us, Christianity remains the bulwark of American life and the only basis for spiritual progress the world around. And one of the basic tenets of the Christian religion is that we should love our neighbors.

During the past 25 years you have seen, as I have, that many of our once strong rural churches have dried up and died; that consolidation

has closed down many of our rural schools that once served as meeting houses; that numerous farm homes have been removed from the landscape; and that family life in both city and country is no longer what it ought to be. Much of the neighborly spirit that once prevailed in rural areas has been lost.

We know that tremendous farm progress has taken place and to a large degree progress in some phases of our living may be responsible for the losses suffered in other aspects. Today we have more widespread educational and religious opportunity, bigger and finer houses, more food and better clothing than in any other place on earth. We work fewer hours for our goods, receive better goods in return, and have more services available than any other people ever enjoyed. Our cars, trucks and good roads make it easier for everybody to go where he wants to go. Farm income is up and the rarely prosperous farmer can today buy all that he needs and most of what his wife wants. Radio, television and convenient movie-houses offer a world of ready-made entertainment, some of it good. Nearly every farm family today receives current magazines, and most of them weekly or daily newspapers.

This is progress, and yet it is easy to see that this same progress has created many new problems in rural life. I think the most serious loss has been the decline of neighborliness. Years ago, our pioneer fathers had to be good neighbors. They depended upon one another to get in the crops, to care for the sick, to build a barn, to

provide entertainment, to borrow a sack of corn meal, or to help plow. They "neighbored" to keep the school and the church alive for the cultural and spiritual welfare of all. In today's busy whirl, too many folks don't take time to be neighborly.

This problem of overlapping of the good of rural life with the evils of urban life was pointed out at the Association of Southern Agricultural Workers meeting in Dallas last February by D. R. Fessler of Virginia. He said:

"There are three major effects of this urbanization of these rural people with which we need to be concerned. They are:

"The lowering of moral standards and the increase in delinquency and crime; the weakening of democratic principles and concern for the common welfare; and in the loss of primary group contacts."

That is an accurate summation of the problem, and here is its solution. During the past seven years, it has been effectively demonstrated in more than 500 rural communities in nearly every county in Texas that rural people may enjoy all of the present-day progress they can afford and want and need, and still be good neighbors. It has been further shown that neighborliness is still a quality to be desired just as it was 2,000 years ago. Through the well-known American love of competition, we have seen dead communities come alive, meeting the needs of young and old together. Where folks work together to build a better neighborhood, the three areas cited by Mr. Fessler become positive; not negative.

For the past seven years, the Farmer-Stockman magazine has offered cash prizes in statewide Rural Neighborhood Progress contests, in co-operation with Texas Agricultural Extension Service. The program is designed to build better communities by taking advantage of the progress described and by helping to restore the desirable spirit of neighborliness. It is aimed to help people to help themselves and to help each other by being better neighbors. Our slogan has been "If you want to live in a better neighborhood, help build one." As a result of this program, we have seen many tangible and lasting results revitalize the life of rural communities in Texas.

One thing that stands out is the way agricultural and material progress speeds up when a community's spiritual and social life are activated. Soil conservation, crop and livestock improvement, better homes and higher standards of living are a part of the program, but we have found that they come slowly, if at all, until the church life, the educational program, the recreational and social life of the community are restored. The material advancements come much more rapidly and certainly where the people are united in Christian fellowship, determined to educate their children for greater opportunity. We have found that where people work together and play together, as our great pioneers did, not neglecting the finer things of life, they can make greater progress than they had dreamed of. A lady in a prize winning community in North Texas told me just a few weeks ago: "This kind of thing just brings out

the best in people." She was referring not only to the people in the community, but to friends in other communities who had taken note of what was happening and who had volunteered to help in many ways.

To me, all of this simply illustrates the truth of the scripture which advises all of us to "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and these other things will be added unto you. "

There is a temptation here to digress long enough to tell you the stories of scores of communities which had little or no church or religious activity until the people came to recognize one another as neighbors again. The idea was expressed better than I can say it by a man in another Texas community, who said: "We've now become organized as neighbors and are pulling together so that about all we need is God and each other. " We have records of numerous communities which either restored former churches or built new ones as the nucleus of their improved rural neighborhood. Many of these communities had been without churches for years, and some had never had a strong program.

You know that it is often difficult to obtain enough support in rural communities for each of the various denominations, and probably few people are ever entirely satisfied with a union or nondenominational church or Sunday school. Folks rightfully expect their church to take a firm stand on matters of doctrine and that can't be done if you take out everything that somebody objects to. However, it is often practical to

begin on this basis until the people find out just how they stand. Buildings are a problem, too, but these have been worked out where the folks wanted to be neighborly. In a community less than 100 miles from here, a few years ago, the Methodist building was falling down and the Baptists had no pews. They moved the Methodist pews into the Baptist building, arranged separate worship schedules and both denominational groups enjoy a better building by working together. In the community's 100-odd year history, the Baptists had never had regular services. Earlier this month my associate, T. C. Richardson, attended church there one Sunday morning and reported they now have Sunday school all the time and a new preacher was "being tried on for size" the day he was there. This kind of result is more typical than unusual.

We have never had an instance of outstanding success in building a rural neighborhood except where the spiritual needs of the community were taken care of. Naturally, I could cite for you extensive reports of achievements in the fields of soil conservation, crop and livestock improvement, home improvement, better diet and higher living standards, rural roads, communications, telephones, electrification and other desirable progress. *in our community, the people have been great in the neighborhoods* They have been great in the neighborhoods that wanted them and were willing to work to get them. But as I said before, these things related to the material side of living come much easier and more certainly in the rural community when the people are

united in Christian fellowship, providing the mutual encouragement that each needs through wholesome recreation and development of cultural opportunities.

I think that the first concern of the church, rural or urban, is the spiritual welfare of the people that it serves. Next comes the in physical well-being, and in rural areas this means the good of the land on which people live. Too often we see examples of trying to satisfy one need, with no regard for the other. *In rural areas, the banks won't balance and the merchants are dying, pointing*

Pastors of rural churches are in a position to serve as real leaders of the community, and many are doing this. At Brinker, in Hopkins county, first prize winner in this year's contest, earlier this month I was impressed by the fact that pastors of four churches serving the people were present and each had a part in the program, including the dedication of the prize money to further the spiritual welfare of the community. Two of the pastors served churches in the community, and two were outside but were attended by residents of Brinker. We can not build better rural neighborhoods without improving rural churches.

Although many preachers are farm boys, it seems to me that too high a percentage of them have regarded lightly the work that can be done in rural areas as they fasten their eyes on city streets. I have been in numerous rural communities where every person living there took part in church or worship services. I have never yet been in a city

or town that could honestly make that claim. There are opportunities for results in reaching unchurched people that cannot be and have never been equaled in city churches. We feel that it is our responsibility to help in restoring and rebuilding rural churches just as we must continue to crusade for soil and water conservation so that Texas farmers may grow better crops and fatter cattle. It is our hope that you, as rural pastors, even though a large city pastorate may be your goal, will not overlook your opportunity to build a great congregation with a smaller number of rural people.

Referring specifically to the Texas Rural Neighborhood Progress Contest, it is sponsored by the Farmer-Stockman magazine, in co-operation with the Texas Agricultural Extension Service, the county agents and county home demonstration agents. Our magazine is received each month in two out of three farm and ranch homes in Texas, and there are extension workers serving every county in the state. Without the help of the Extension Service, a widespread program like this would be impossible.

The program itself is not new, because it embodies everything that will help to build better farms, better homes, better communities, a better state and a better nation. Most of the points have been emphasized for many years by the Extension Service and our magazine. The contest is designed to provide an incentive to get the least active

communities to start toward some goals. It is so designed that a community that already has everything on a going basis will have a more difficult time to win. We are trying to raise the lowest to the average, which continually raises the average as we succeed.

We have seen much accomplished through this contest, but we have no notion that our work is done. It is barely started. We are continuing the program, continually seeking new ways to make it more effective. We know that you pastors are in position to help build better rural neighborhoods, and we hope that we may have the opportunity of working with you in the years ahead to build stronger churches that more may become better Christians.