SOME SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SOUTH

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It is a privilege to speak on this theme in this conference. Especially so, since you are concerned with the nurture and mission of the Christian faith and its implications for modern life. Only the arrogant or the ignorant would assume the time or talent to do more than trace in a tentative outline some of the important aspects of the topic. Most of this sketch will be familiar background to most of you. Yet this very familiarity soothes our sensitivity, solidifies our stereotypes, smooths out the sharpness of contrasts, and makes sameness out of strangeness. Paradoxically, we tend to know both most and least about the things closest to us. Let us try to stand back from our Southland and review a general picture painted with a few broad strokes.

The Southland is a regional part of the nation. A region stresses its own uniqueness within the unity of the nation. Sometimes the South has acted like a section, stressing its individuality against the national unity. We are celebrating during this decade the centennial of a terrible war resulting from these sectionalistic tendencies breaking apart our federal union. Certainly our so-called "southern way of life" roots its past in the plantation system, in ruralism, in a segregated bi-racial pattern, states' rights, and fundamentalistic Protestantism. Each of these traditional elements is being challenged by national trends. Plantation-type agriculture is giving way to mechanized farming, industrialism is overcoming ruralism, integration of the races is biting into the old doctrine of segregation, states' rights political views are constantly being bombarded by centralized federal government, and an uneasy conscience is appearing in Protestant religious circles. The South is, indeed, a region in ferment.

To outsiders, the region may seem to be the "Solid South," and many insiders are lulled into this same monolithic view. But to students of the South it is a land of contrasts, a region of subregions, a mosaic of vivid differences. There is the old plantation area running from the ocean coastline or the river delta to the hill country. This is the usual stereotype of the "glory that was the Old South." Next is the piedmont or hilly area, running in several states back to the mountains. This is the area that industrialized first and now tends to approximate the national norms more closely than any other part of the South. The mountain sections of several southern states constitute another subregion recently emerging from the isolation and individualism, the poverty and puritanism characteristic of American frontiers. Within these three broad subregions there are others. Perhaps the most important subregionalization of the South today is that of metropolitan subregions and nonmetropolitan or rural subregions. There are many souths, not one. Let us hold this caution sign over any broad sweeping generalizations about the South, including our own.

Basically, the South is a region of traditionalism in transition. Some point with pride to the achievements of our forefathers. Others worship the "southern way of life" as a religion. Some view with alarm changes in the old patterns. Many are sovereign southerners before they are Americans--Americans before they are Christians. Yet everywhere traditionalism is in transition.