

# President's Address

## Southern Baptist Convention Sermon

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### "It's Time to Move"

by Morris H. Chapman

Beginning in chapter two, verse one of Deuteronomy, the Bible says, "Then we turned and journeyed into the wilderness...and we skirted Mount Seir for many days. And the Lord spoke to me saying: 'You have skirted this mountain long enough; turn northward' " (NKJV).

God's people, the people of Israel, had been poised and waiting to enter the Promised Land. Suddenly their faith failed them and their hearts were frozen in fear. Because they disobeyed God they were banished to the hot sands of the desert, left to wandering in the wilderness until a new generation would take God at His Word.

At Mount Seir, the Word of the Lord came to the Children of Israel. His Word was clear and unavoidable. He was saying, "You have circled the mountain too long. It's time to move. You must move up the mountain, over the mountain and toward the land of promise."

#### **It's Time to Take the High Ground**

The Israelites knew full well what the Lord was calling them to do. They were to take the high country. The promised land was over the mountains to the north. Between the Children of Promise and their Promised Land lay obstacles, giants, and pitfalls aplenty...but there was also the promise.

God's Word spoke truth about His own honor. He is not a God who calls His people to skirt mountains. He is a God who calls His people to take the high country.

Southern Baptists are not a people called to skirt mountains; we are a people, a convention, a denomination of destiny. We have not come to this place because of our own worthiness, or even of our churches. We have been brought to this moment of destiny by God, who has worked mightily among us **for His own glory**.

The reason for our very existence upon this earth is to give Him the Glory. For God to receive all the glory in my life, I must keep nothing for self and surrender all for Jesus' sake. Manley Beasley said it this way, "You will never really know God until you come to the end of yourself." Paul said, "He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord" (1 Cor. 1:31). Again he said, "Of such a one will I glory: yet of myself I will not glory..." (2 Cor. 12:5).

We are to bask in His glory, not our own. We are to bow to His greatness, not our own. We are to bend to His Will, not our own. When pride struts into our lives, God's power

steals away. We need less pride and more power. We need a power surge from heaven. On our faces before God our prayer must be, "God send the power, the wonder-working power."

We cannot lose sight of God working among us. He has honored us with the supreme calling of bearing His gospel to a dying world where people grope in darkness. He has placed before us opportunities our forebears could never envision.

But God did not bring us to this place that we might skirt the mountains of opportunity at this critical hour. **It's time to take the high ground.**

#### **It's Time to Remember Who We Are**

Like the Children of Israel, Southern Baptists need to be reminded of who we are, of what God has done through us and among us. When that band of missionary Baptists gathered in Augusta, Georgia in 1845, they underlined once and for all the fact that this new convention would be a people with a purpose. The founders stated that this convention would take as its central cause "eliciting, combining, and directing the energies of the whole denomination in one sacred effort, for the propagation of the Gospel..." (From the Preamble and Constitution of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1845, in Proceedings of the Southern Baptist Convention (Richmond, VA: H. K. Ellyson, 1845), p. 3).

#### **It's Time to Accept the Challenge of the Hour**

As Southern Baptists meet in Indianapolis in 1992, our world stands at a crucial moment in history. Nations in the West which were once Christian are now under the sway of a devastating secularism while newly-opened nations in the East cry for spiritual nourishment and witness.

The Foreign Mission Board has led the way with its "Green Alert" status for rapid mobilization to take the Gospel to countries in crisis. Every Southern Baptist church and agency should maintain "Green Alert" status. We must be in a constant state of readiness to go "and teach all nations."

It's time to move! We are living in an unprecedented time for sharing the Gospel around the world. Southern Baptists need a strike force of witnesses in

the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

Suddenly we are no longer peering over the Berlin Wall. We are looking into the eyes of men and women who have a desperate longing in their hearts. Know it or not, they have a longing for Jesus. They are searching for the Truth. Yet the Mormons, the Moonies and the Muslims are marching double-time into Moscow. The Russian Orthodox Church is clamoring for the right to become the state church. If these and other groups succeed in their pursuits, this vast spiritual wasteland may once again be closed to the preaching of Christ crucified and risen from the grave.

Hearts not confronted with the Gospel of Jesus Christ will fall prey to "another gospel". The people will die without Christ to the everlasting shame of the church.

God has blazed a way through the wilderness of Communism. He has opened heretofore unthinkable avenues for spreading the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In the light of all that is occurring, we who profess Jesus as personal Savior and know Him to be Lord of lords and King of kings must pray for a mighty moving of God's Spirit. We must pray for revival to sweep like D-Day from our shores to take the whole of Europe and beyond, for the Lord Jesus Christ.

At the invitation of our Foreign Mission Board my wife and I traveled to Russia, Ukraine, Hungary and Romania soon after the failed coup in Russia last September. Our itinerary included travel to several cities in Romania; Oradea, Arad, Timisoara and Bucharest.

In each city I was invited to preach in Romanian Baptist churches during regular services. I preached to packed congregations. The aisles were often filled with people who week by week stand ram-rod straight for two hours of praise and preaching. In Timisoara, I preached in a church just around the corner from the town square where the Romanian revolution started several years ago. It soon spread to the capitol city of Bucharest and led to the overthrow of the country's communist dictator.

In that town square of Timisoara, Baptists and other Christians were shot and killed while they prayed for freedom. They gave their lives for Christ's sake. Today, although the country remains under communist rule, the government is inviting the churches to prepare students to teach the Bible along with their other major fields of study. While the Romanian government is bringing the Bible into the classroom, in America we are banning the Bible from the classroom. I am convinced that only a national spiritual awakening can save us now.

Our own nation bears the marks of cultural and spiritual decay. A struggle for the very soul of this nation is at stake. Our moral and social fabric bears the rot of generations of compromise and an increasing antagonism toward the Judeo-Christian heritage.

We live on one of the world's most critical mission fields. The same God who calls us to the uttermost parts of the earth also calls us to the high ground of missions at home. To those lost and without hope, Southern Baptists have a word of witness concerning Jesus Christ. To families devastated by brokenness, Southern Baptists have a word of healing and wholeness. To individuals whose lives have been ruined by the reign of immorality and situation ethics, Southern Baptists have a word concerning God's law and God's grace.

To those in America's inner cities, Southern Baptists have a word of encouragement and challenge. To a generation of young people set adrift on a sea-tide of uncertainty, Southern Baptists have a word of hope and life.

But the message we bear is not actually our word, it is God's Word. For a revival to sweep this nation, half-hearted prayers of cold-hearted people will not do. God-called preachers must send out a call for praying people. Not those who pray, "Father, give me everything and forgive me nothing," but those who pray, "Not my will but Thine be done."

Southern Baptists face a moment of decision. Are we ready to move up and over the mountain? God is seeking men and women after His own heart to lead us. Where shall He find them, in your church, in my church, in our denominational institutions and agencies? I believe this very moment God is working in the hearts of those who will lead us to be faithful in our witness to the world. If you doubt how God moves among His people to raise up spiritual leaders, listen to this amazing story.

Billy Sunday's career reached its apex with his New York City revival in 1917, a campaign that reaped a harvest of over ninety-eight thousand decisions in ten weeks. Then, with marked suddenness, he lost his grip on the national consciousness.

Sunday's decline coincided with a decline of revivalism in general, and some observers believed he was surely the last great warrior of his tribe. But on the night he died, November 6, 1935, a gangly teenager strolled self-consciously into an itinerant evangelist's tabernacle in Charlotte, North Carolina. He was unaware that the most famous preacher in America at that time had just died. And when he hit the sawdust trail later that evening, neither he nor anyone who watched him stride nervously down the aisle could have suspected that this boy, Billy Graham, who would become the most famous preacher of all time had just given his life to Jesus Christ. (William Martin, A Prophet With Honor, William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1991, p. 52).

### **Southern Baptists on the Move**

If we are to be true to our calling, if we are to be true to our identity, if we are to be true to our heritage, it is time now for Southern Baptists to move quickly into the high country. There will always be struggles, but I don't want to be in a denomination which inhabits the low country.

Some say our convention is fragmented. This denomination will not be fragmented as long as we preach the Gospel because:

The Gospel is not fragmented;  
Our churches are not fragmented;  
Our vision is not fragmented.

We will not be distracted from our central purpose. We will not be compromised in our gospel witness. We will not be threatened by anxiety concerning our future.

We remember who we are, and whose we are—and we must move forward. To those churches who join a new movement and move away, we offer no word of censure, rebuke or retribution. Know this: We will not be angry, **but**

**we will not be deterred from the mission God has called us to accomplish for His own Glory.**

This is the denomination built, led, and sustained by leaders such as J. B. Gambrell, George W. Truett, W. A. Criswell, and Herschel Hobbs.

This is the convention led forward in unapologetic conviction by theologian-statesmen such as E. Y. Mullins, James P. Boyce, B. H. Carroll, and Lee Scarborough.

This is the missionary people led forward by Baker James Cauthen, Theron Rankin, and Arthur Rutledge.

This is the denomination which called out the remarkable missionary service of literally thousands of missionaries, among them Lottie Moon, Annie Armstrong, Bill Wallace, and a gallery of the faithful too lengthy to name.

In 1992 we stand again with George W. Truett in his courageous call for religious liberty...with E. Y. Mullins and J. B. Gambrell in their call for Baptist conviction to be the platform of our cooperation. We stand again with Lee Scarborough and John R. Sampey in their burden for the lost...with Annie Armstrong in America's inner cities and Lottie Moon among the world's masses. We stand again with Baker James Cauthen on the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ...and with W. A. Criswell and B. H. Carroll on the solid authority of God's perfect Word. We do so without apology.

We stand on the shoulders of giants. Those who would use these names for some other movement pay us the ultimate compliment—but they cannot and will not **hijack our heritage.**

We know who we are...and whose we are. Our future is not in our hands. It is not held by any leadership corps, or by any Baptist ecclesiocracy. It is not held hostage by those who would see us forfeit our calling. It is not even directed by the messengers of this convention. It is in the hands of Almighty God.

Our gospel is His gospel. Our authority is His inspired and inerrant Word. Our message concerns the glorious work of substitutionary atonement wrought by His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Our energy is the power of His Holy Spirit. Our honor is to be used to His glory for the extension of His kingdom. We were not promised the achievement of certain statistics. We were not promised the accomplishment of certain programs. We are promised the blessings of God if we share the Gospel and minister in Jesus' Name until He returns

Let us never forget that our marching orders come from above. We are called to move into the high country by the God who has first called us unto Himself. We place our trust in Him, and Him alone.

### **A Plea to Southern Baptists**

In 1845, the founders of this convention issued an address to the public, setting forth the purpose of this new denomination. They issued a simple plea: "Our language unto all America, and to all Christendom, if they will hear us, is 'come over', and for these objects, as ye love souls, and the divine Saviour of souls, 'help us'. We ask at this juncture for nothing else. We have had more talk than work about these objects too long." (From "To the Brethren in the United States; to the Congregations Connected with the Respective Churches; and to All Candid Men," in Proceed-

ings of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1845, p. 19).

In 1919, the Southern Baptist Convention issued a Fraternal Address: in which this convention put forth a call "To those of 'Like Faith With Us' Scattered Abroad, Beloved in the Lord." (From Fraternal Address of Southern Baptists, published in pamphlet form by the convention in 1919, no publication data printed).

In this historic document, Southern Baptists expressed their doctrinal commitments and confessed the "faith once received." The "Address" was issued "in order that those who to any degree lack knowledge of the things which Southern Baptists believe and practice may identify their oneness with us." That is the kind of honest cooperation and partnership so desperately needed in our own day.

The committee which produced the "Address" was formed in response to a stirring address delivered by Southern Baptist Convention president J. B. Gambrell. The world had just suffered the "war to end all wars". As Gambrell stated, "This convention sits in council today to devise ways and means to meet the solemn responsibilities of this challenging hour. We are called in an unusual way," he said, "to be considerate, serious, and prayerful. We need that wisdom which comes from above. No human wisdom will suffice." (From "Address of President Gambrell," Proceedings of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1919, pp. 17-18).

Those Southern Baptists of old stated boldly that cooperation was on the basis of conviction...not at its expense. The "Fraternal Address" put forth Southern Baptist conviction in clear terms. We can do no less today.

For the greater part of the twentieth century Southern Baptists have struggled to state clearly the doctrinal commitments which have formed us and which we share. Belief in the Almighty Creator of the Universe, absolute in His holiness and rich in grace; of Jesus Christ the divine God-man, the incarnate Word who dwelt among us; of His substitutionary work of redemption on Calvary's cross; of His physical resurrection from the grave; of His coming again to consummate the age; of the work of God in bringing men and women to salvation and everlasting life; of believer's baptism as the soul's confession of new life in Jesus Christ.

When Southern Baptists have spoken, they have spoken clearly, they have spoken corporately, and they have spoken convictionally. We have also spoken cooperatively. In that spirit, we now offer a new fraternal message, addressed to the denomination within and the world without. It is a call to **go up and over the mountain toward the promised land.**

### **To the Churches of the Southern Baptist Convention**

Stay the course, keep the faith, remain steadfast in the work of the Lord. Let us move together toward Bold Mission Thrust in the remaining years of this century. We must be united in faith, practice, and mission. Now is the hour for even greater cooperation and sacrifice.

Guard your witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Do not join or approve those who would reject clear biblical teachings. Protect the purity of your congregation, place a premium on holy living and give Jesus preeminence in all matters of the church.

### **To the State Conventions**

Remember who you are and reflect on the heritage of mission and ministry we share. As sister bodies we must move together in common cause at home and abroad. Keep a world vision of the gospel in view.

### **To the Woman's Missionary Union**

Stay true to your founding vision. Do not be distracted from your mission by those who would divert you for their own purposes. Remember your founding constitution of 1888 which stated your desire and purpose of "simulating the missionary spirit and the grace of giving among the women and children of the churches, and aiding in collecting funds for missionary purposes, to be disbursed by the Boards of the Southern Baptist Convention and disclaiming all intention of independent action..." (From the preamble to the 1888 constitution of the Woman's Missionary Union, SBC, cited in Catherine B. Allen, A Century to Celebrate: History of the Woman's Missionary Union. Birmingham, WMU/SBC, 1987, p. 47).

You have been a bulwark of support for Southern Baptist missions and an example to all of missionary commitment. Do not falter now.

### **To the Seminaries of the Southern Baptist Convention**

Give us theological leadership for the renewal of this denomination. Provide us with training for preachers, teachers, missionaries, and fellow servants. Model for us the united disciplines of faith and learning. Be true to the convictions which birthed you and called you into being.

### **To the Baptists of the World**

Join with us in the sacred cause of missions as we work together, hand in hand, for the furtherance of the gospel. Let us enter into partnerships on the basis of conviction and not mere convenience. Go with us together where none of us could go alone. We must work together in the high calling of mission and ministry, and in the task of guarding the integrity of Baptist witness.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion I would ask each of you, will we move together up and over the mountain? Future generations will tell the story of Southern Baptist faithfulness, or of our faltering. At stake is not merely the increased vitality and vigor of a denomination, at stake is the soul of a people.

Southern Baptists have been a mountain-climbing people driven by a commitment the world will never understand. It is our turn to take the high ground...our time for putting our lives on the line.

In moving to the high ground we move beyond moral infidelity, beyond the merely political, beyond doctrinal ambiguity, beyond division within our ranks, all for the sake of the One who called us unto Himself and set us to His work. We must be no less than soldiers of the cross and followers of the Lamb.

**TO HIM BE THE GLORY, WORLD WITHOUT  
END, AMEN.**