

**President James Merritt's Convention Address
2002 Southern Baptist Convention
June 11, 2002, St. Louis, Missouri**

2 Timothy 4:7-8

"Until He Comes"

Introduction

The last two years of my life have passed by faster than a speeding bullet. Though the pace of being president of this Convention has been exhausting, the honor has been exhilarating. I will never get over the fact that you, my fellow Southern Baptists, have entrusted me with this position. Being president of the Southern Baptist Convention has made me realize more than ever how blessed I am to be a Christian and how great it is to be a Baptist.

I am reminded of Charles Spurgeon, the great British preacher who was raised in a Congregationalist church, but after he was saved, he got convicted by the Scripture, and wanted to be baptized by immersion and become a Baptist. He wrote his parents asking for permission, and his mother wrote back reluctantly:

Dear Charles,

I often prayed the Lord to make you a Christian, but I never asked that you might become a Baptist.

Spurgeon replied:

Dear Mother,

The Lord has answered your prayer with His usual bounty and has given you exceedingly abundantly above what you asked or thought.¹

Well, I praise God that I have a Christian heart and a Baptist home! I thank you again, my brothers and sisters, for the honor of being your president. I leave you with a blessing, the blessing of Jabez, "Oh that You would bless us indeed, and enlarge our territory, that Your hand would be with us and that You would keep us from evil."

But I not only leave you with a blessing, I leave you with a burden as well. Robert Clinton has done extensive research in the area of biblical leadership, and in his study determined that there are approximately 300 leaders chronicled in the Bible. A few years ago he studied 100 of the most prominent leaders in the Bible, and to his dismay discovered that less than one in four of these leaders finished well.²

What is true for leaders can be true of churches, and true of denominations. I say to you today that I want to finish well. I want my church to finish well. I want the Southern Baptist Convention to finish well. But I want to be very candid. Twenty plus years ago I was convinced, and I believe rightly so, that the greatest danger to the Southern Baptist Convention was liberalism. I no longer believe that is true. Though we must never let our theological guard down, I believe there are greater dangers facing the Southern Baptist Convention today.

We face a secular culture that is becoming increasingly strident and militant in its anti-Christian, anti-truth, anti-God mentality, and I fear the danger of facing this spirit with a lackadaisical heart. We face a world whose heart is becoming increasingly cold that needs to

feel the hot fire of evangelism, and I fear the danger of seeing this need with a lackluster passion. We face a devil alive and well, who has saved his biggest guns and his heaviest artillery for these last days doing all he can to make us throw up our hands and quit, and I fear the danger of a lukewarm spirit.

I want to be able to say personally; I want my church to be able to say congregationally; I want our denomination to be able to say corporately what the apostle Paul said in perhaps the most famous last words ever written: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (2 Tim. 4:7, NIV).

Last words are very very important. I heard about a lawyer who was trying to console a weeping widow. Her husband had passed away without a will. The lawyer said, "Did your husband have any last words?"

The widow said, "You mean right before he died?"

The lawyer said, "Of course. You see, they might be helpful, if it's not too painful for you to recall."

She said, "Well the last words he said just before he died were, 'You don't scare me with that gun; you couldn't hit the broad side of a barn.'"

Well, I wonder what the last words of the Southern Baptist Convention might be? Paul wrote these words believing he was either going to Jesus, or Jesus was coming for him. I believe these words give us a blueprint for what we, as Southern Baptists, should be committed to until He comes.

I. Until He Comes, Be Faithful to the Fight

As Paul takes a backward look at his past, he says, "I have fought the good fight" (v.7a). Both the words "fought" and "fight" come from a Greek word *agon*, which gives us our English word "agony." It literally means "conflict," or "contest." Paul was a spiritual soldier in the army of God.

I want to remind you today that every saint is a soldier of the cross. God does not have a volunteer army; the draft is still in effect, and everybody has been drafted. What Paul said to Timothy in 2 Tim. 2:3, he says to us, "You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ" (NKJV). Christianity is not for the faint of heart. There is no place for conscientious objectors in the kingdom of God. When you come to Jesus, He does not invite you to a picnic, He calls you to a fight.

C. S. Lewis once said, "There is no neutral ground in the universe: Every square inch, every split second is claimed by God, and counterclaimed by Satan."³ Every child of God faces three foes, and they don't fight fair, they don't fight clean, they don't accept cease-fires, and they don't sign peace treaties. They are the world, the flesh, and the devil; what I call sin, self, and Satan. If you don't believe there is a war going on right now with these three foes, just pick up your newspaper, turn on your television, or listen to your radio.

Southern Baptists, we must be faithful to the fight because there is a war going on for the culture, and there is a war going on for the conscience. Dartmouth professor, Jeffrey Hart, in a recent speech reported by the Wall Street Journal, said:

A great many things happened all of sudden in this country in the very recent past. Without going into the right and wrong of every case I list them objectively. Within living memory, abortion was a felony in virtually every state in the nation. Today, abortion is commonplace in America; demands that it be federally funded are alleged to be rooted in the Constitution.

Within living memory, hard-core pornography was largely kept out of sight, usually by a rough agreement between sellers and authorities. Now the hard-core stuff is available on your newsstand.

Within living memory, school children recited the Pledge of Allegiance every morning and in many schools simple prayers. At Christmastime, they sang Christmas carols. Suddenly all of that fell under proscription.

Within living memory, homosexuals were, for the most part, discreet. Suddenly we find that they demand public legitimization of their peculiarity, stage parades and demand representation in governing bodies as a legitimate minority. Is there any question that a revolution has in fact been imposed upon an unsuspecting nation?

Now, I would take issue with some things Mr. Hart said, but his major point is well taken—Southern Baptists, we are in a war, and we must be faithful to the fight. The very moment a parent suggests that some books are not suitable for elementary school children because of sexual explicitness or obscene language, the entire academic establishment explodes in indignation and cries “censorship!” In contrast, whenever a school library discovers some long-forgotten volume which political correctness now decrees might offend one group or another, that book is instantly yanked. When the school inflicts books on youngsters, children and teenagers alike, which deliberately undermine the moral and religious convictions of parents, it is termed “education.” But when parents complain, they are portrayed as “narrow-minded” or “intolerant.”

Southern Baptists, we’ve got a war on our hands, and we must be faithful to the fight. The American Family Association, a pro-family group based in Mississippi, printed a series of full page “Truth in Love” ads in newspapers across the country. In those ads they mentioned the fact that Scripture calls homosexuality a sin, and the ads offered homosexual men and women forgiveness and freedom through Jesus Christ. They also mentioned the harmful physical consequences of the homosexual lifestyle.

The San Francisco Board of Supervisors responded with a letter to those involved with that campaign, announcing their “hateful rhetoric,” stating “There is a direct correlation” between hate crimes against homosexuals and the religious message about homosexuality espoused by religious groups. They also passed two resolutions which linked hate crimes, even the murder of homosexuals, with the Christian message at what the city termed “anti-gay” ads. The Board even went further and urged “local television stations not to broadcast advertising campaigns aimed at ‘converting’ homosexuals.”

Now, that may not surprise you, but in a stunning decision that threatens the very heart of religious freedom, a three judge panel for the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals upheld the right of the city and the county of San Francisco to lash out at the religious beliefs of these people who oppose homosexuality, even though they admitted that the principle of separation of church and state applies to the official disapproval or hostility toward religion.

Southern Baptists, we are in a war, and we must be faithful to the fight. Now, I warn you that we will get no help from Hollywood or from the media. Robert and Linda Lichter and Stanley Rothman, in their book, *The Media Elite*, interviewed the people who bring us the nightly news, and they found that 90% of them are pro-choice; 75% believe homosexuality is morally acceptable; and only 8% attend religious services regularly.

They went on to say that in a survey of 104 of the top Hollywood elite, to better understand their opinions on religion and morality, they found that 93% never go to church; 95% believe homosexuality is perfectly acceptable; 97% were pro-abortion; only 16% believed adultery was wrong.⁴

More and more we are being told to sit down, shut up, go along and get along; be inclusive, be tolerant, be nice, and be quiet. More and more I see pastors, churches, and denominations crumbling before this onslaught of humanistic, political correctness. I fear the spirit that is described in this poignant poem:

When I was young and bold and strong,
Right was right and wrong was wrong;
With plume on high and flag unfurled,
I rode away to right the world.
“Come out and fight you dogs,” said I,
And wept there was, but once to die.

But I am old, and good and bad
Are woven in a crazy plaid;
I sit and say, “The world is so,
and he is wise who lets it go.”
A battle lost, a battle won,
The difference is very small, my son.

Well, Southern Baptists, the difference is small, but the result is great. This is why Paul called it a “good” fight. It’s a “good” fight because it is God’s fight. I know we are told we ought to keep politics out of the pulpit, but I believe whenever the political impacts the spiritual and the moral, we have the biblical responsibility to address the political. We now face the fact that there are certain groups who protest us every year, and they have let me know in their correspondence, “We are not going away.” Well, I’ve got news for the pornographer, the adulterer, the homosexual, the pedophile, and the abortionist—WE ARE NOT GOING AWAY, EITHER.

Southern Baptists, let us say with love in our hearts, but resolve in our souls, we are not going to march under the white flag of compromise; we’re going to march under the bloodstained banner of the cross of Jesus Christ. We will never give out, never give up, and never give in when it comes to standing up for the truth of the Word of God. We will speak the truth in love, but we will speak the truth!

Now, we will not win every battle. In fact, we may lose most of them. But ours will be the spirit of the International Olympic Creed that says, “The most important thing in the olympic games is not to win, but to take part. Just as the most important thing in life is not to triumph, but to struggle. The essential thing is not to have conquered, but to have fought well.”

We may be a Denominational David standing against a world full of Goliaths, but we have the slingshot of truth in one hand and the Rock of Ages in the other, and we are guaranteed to have victory in Jesus. So, Southern Baptists, until He comes, be faithful to the fight.

II. Until He Comes, Be Faithful to the Faith

Paul goes on to say, “I have kept the faith” (v.7c). Now Paul here was referring to the faith “once for all delivered to the saints.” He was referring to the whole counsel of God found in the sacred Scriptures. The word “kept” literally means, “to guard as if you were guarding a treasure.” You see, first of all, we must be faithful in defending the faith. This book is a treasure of truth that should be guarded as if it were the crown jewels of England. This faith includes hell as well as heaven; the holiness of God as well as the love of God; the wrath of God as well as the mercy of God; the problem of sin as well as the pleasure of salvation; repentance as well as faith.

H. Richard Niebuhr once described what is called Classical Liberalism as consisting in a “God without wrath, bringing people without sin, into a kingdom without judgment, through a Christ without a cross.” Quite frankly, I am seeing that type of preaching and teaching creep more and more into what used to be called our “evangelical world.” I want to say to every preacher here, regardless of your style of worship; whether you are sinner-sensitive, seeker-sensitive, or you don’t have enough sense to be sensitive, keep the faith.

When the hounds of heresy nipped at his heels, Paul kept the faith. When the lions of apostasy roared in his face, he kept the faith. Until He comes, heresy will grow, apostasy will abound, and the love of many will wax cold, but Southern Baptists, let's keep the faith.

But we also must be faithful in preaching the faith. We are being told today by some church growth gurus, baby boomer experts, and church marketing agents, "Don't preach on hell, don't talk about money, don't mention politics, don't be controversial."

Well, I'm reminded of what William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army once said. He said: "The chief danger of the 20th Century (and I believe now he would say the 21st Century) will be religion without holiness, forgiveness without repentance, salvation without regeneration, and heaven without hell." I would be the first to say that we ought to be real in the way we practice the faith, and we ought to be relevant in the way we preach the faith. But we should never shy away from preaching the whole counsel of God. Drama is wonderful, praise and worship music is refreshing; but what God has promised to honor above all is the preaching of His Word.

But we should also be faithful in sharing the faith. If this world is going to be won for Jesus Christ, or at least evangelized for Him, the job most likely will be done by evangelical denominations like ours. Eighty percent of protestant missionaries spreading the gospel around the world are affiliated with evangelical groups, not mainline denominations. If we, the vanguard of evangelicals, do not get it done, we will have failed in utilizing the highest power for the greatest task.

But I want you to listen to this sobering truth about where we are as Southern Baptists here in America. According to the North American Mission Board, from 1990 to the year 2000, the U.S. population grew by 13.1%. In comparison, in that same period of time, Southern Baptist churches increased by 9.2%, and the resident membership increased by 7.8%. Their conclusion: Southern Baptists lost "market share" of the population between 1990 and 2000. Add to that, that 84% of Southern Baptists are not regularly involved in personal witnessing of any type.

Furthermore, there is a plateau in baptisms that has existed in our denomination since 1950. In this 50+ year period of time, baptisms have ranged from a high of 446,000 in 1972 to a low of 336,000 in 1978, but have stayed within a +/-10% of the average 384,000 during that period of time. In short, we have not been able to create a sustainable trend of increased baptisms during the past 50 years.

Now, we can wring our hands, walk the floor, and come up with new programs, but the only remedy for this problem, and the only cure for this malady, is getting back to evangelism; relational, situational, confrontational evangelism that realizes we have come to seek and to save that which was lost. If we ever lose that distinctive, we will fall by the wayside and join the ranks of other denominations whose corpses litter the religious highway today. Southern Baptists, until He comes, be faithful to the faith.

III. Until He Comes, Be Faithful to the Finish

Paul concludes by saying, "I have finished the race" (v.7b). This word race refers not to a sprint; it refers to a marathon. Paul was not concerned about the stop watch; all he cared about was the finish line.

I want to say a word to my fellow pastors, and all who might hear this by tape. There is a trend among today's pastors that breaks my heart.

- Each month 1,500 pastors leave the ministry due to moral failure, spiritual burnout, or contention in their church.
- Eighty percent of pastors and eighty-four percent of their spouses feel unqualified and discouraged in their role in ministry.

- Eighty percent of seminary and Bible school graduates who enter the ministry will leave it within the first five years.
- Fifty percent are so discouraged that they would leave the ministry if they could, but have no other way to make a living.⁵

I'm sure there are pastors here today who are on the verge of quitting. Let me encourage you to stay faithful. God has called all of us and equipped all of us to be winners, and the truth is, quitters never win, and winners never quit. Your race track may have low hurdles, high hurdles, potholes and bumps, but be faithful to the finish.

I heard about a football player who was talking to a friend of his, and the friend said, "How are you getting along with your girlfriend?" He said, "Not so good. She told me last night she would be faithful to the end." The friend said, "Well, what's wrong with that?" He said, "I'm the left tackle." Well, be faithful to the end.

Let me give you two motivations to stay faithful. First of all, remember what we are running for—the crown. "Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness..." (v.8a, NKJV). Paul knew he not only faced the Lord's appraisal; what he wanted was the Lord's approval. That's why he said to the Ephesian elders, "But none of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20:24, NKJV).

God is not concerned with how fast you run in your race, but how far you run. It is not how you start the race; it's how you finish the race that counts with God. All that counts is hitting the finish line with His approval.

There was a young English pianist who gave his inaugural concert to a full house in a London hall. His music was brilliant. When he finished, the crowd gave him a long standing ovation. He retreated backstage. The stage manager urged him to return for a bow and an encore, but the young pianist refused. The manager said, "The entire audience is standing and clapping for you; you must go back."

The young musician said, "Not everyone is standing. There is a gray-haired man in the balcony who remains seated."

The manager peeked out and said, "You're right, but everyone else is standing, he makes no difference. Don't worry about him."

The young pianist replied, "He makes all the difference—he is my teacher."

When Stephen was about to go to heaven being stoned to death, he saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God. Pastor, it doesn't matter what this world thinks about your ministry. It doesn't matter what the politically correct, the intellectually elite, or the financially powerful think about your ministry. It doesn't matter if anyone else is standing and clapping when you hit the finish line as long as Jesus is!

I tell you, I want that crown, but the greatest privilege of my existence will be to cast that crown at the feet of Jesus on bended knee, and proclaim Him as my Lord.

But let us also remember who we are running to—the Christ. Yes, there is a crown, but that crown comes from "the Lord, the righteous Judge, [who] will give [it] to me on that Day—and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing" (2 Tim.4:8b, NKJV). I don't know exactly when that appearing is going to take place. I agree once more with C. S. Lewis, who said, "As a Christian I take it for granted that human history will some day end; and I'm offering Omniscience no advice as to the best date for that consummation."⁶ There's one thing that matters, and that is that we love His appearing.

I just want to add a parenthetical statement. I have a lot of friends who are pre-tribulational in their eschatology; I have friends who are post-tribulational; I have friends who are mid-tribulational. But there is one thing all of them have in common. Every one of them loves His

appearing. Every one of them believes in the literal, physical, visible return of the Lord Jesus Christ. A real Christian is someone who, from the moment he is saved, looks for, lives for, and longs for His coming, and that is all that matters. Southern Baptists, we will not all agree on everything, but we agree on far more than we disagree on, and I exhort us not only to finish well, but to finish well together.

We are running to Him; He is coming for us. But until He comes, let's keep moving onward. Let's keep going forward. Let's keep looking upward.

In 1973 a horse named Secretariat became a legend for all time. Thirty years later, the efforts of that horse are still gauged as the benchmark for greatness. You see, not only did Secretariat win the Triple Crown, but he did it with a performance never before duplicated, nor since. At the Belmont Stakes, the last leg of the Triple Crown, he not only won the race by 31 lengths, but he set new records along the way because he ran each quarter mile succeedingly faster. For one and one-half miles, that thoroughbred got faster and faster. In fact, he was accelerating at such an incredible pace, his trainer said if the race had been extended another lap, his heart would literally have exploded.⁷

My fellow Baptists, let us run our race the same way—let's hit the tape with chest out, head high, running harder and faster than we did from the beginning.

Soon will our Savior from heaven appear;
Sweet is the hope and its power to cheer;
All will be changed by a glimpse of His face—
This is the goal at the end of our race!

I thank God for our president. I am grateful for his leadership in the war on terrorism. I am thankful he has the greatest military power in history to help him fight this war. But far greater than the task of freeing this world from the horror of terrorism is the task of freeing this world from the tyranny of sin. Far higher than the power of nuclear missiles is the power of the Holy Spirit of God.

Every Southern Baptist pastor, every Southern Baptist church, and this entire denomination has been given the highest power to carry out the greatest task. So until He comes, let us exercise this highest power, carrying out this greatest task, being faithful to the fight, being faithful to the faith, being faithful to the finish. Even so, come Lord Jesus.

Endnotes

1 Iain Murray, ed. *The Early Years* (London: Banner of Truth, 1962) p.125.

2 "Seven Habits of Effective Church Leaders," Robert Clinton, *The Pastor's Update*, 7/91.

3 Cited by Clyde S. Kilby, *A Mind Awake: An Anthology of C. S. Lewis* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968), p. 169.

4 Robert Lichter and Linda S. Lichtner and Stanley Rothman, "Hollywood and America: the Odd Couple," *Public Opinion*, December/January 1993, p.34.

5 Bill Bright and James O. Davis, *Beyond All Limits: The Synergistic Church for a Planet in Crisis* (Orlando, Florida: New Life Publications, 2002) 22.

6 C. S. Lewis, "Is Progress Possible?" *God in the Dot: Essays on Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Mi: Eerdmans, 1970), 312.

7 "Retirement or Refirement," Max Lucado, *Upwords*, 9/10/00.

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