

**President Jack Graham's Convention Address
2003 Southern Baptist Convention
June 17, 2003, Phoenix, Arizona**

The theme of the Southern Baptist Convention is *Kingdom First*, taken from Matthew 6:33:

***"But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness,
and all these things shall be added unto you" (NKJV).***

Our priorities, prayers, purpose, and passion is exalting the King and expanding the kingdom. I personally believe that Southern Baptists have come to the kingdom for such a time as this. We have been called to the kingdom of God. It is the call of our risen Redeemer King—and it's my prayer—that our Redeemer's kingdom will capture our hearts and imaginations through our churches and missionary involvement around the world.

The kingdom mission will be more than a theme—it will be a way of life. We as Southern Baptists have an incredible, incredible opportunity and I don't want to miss the moment.

Winston Churchill said these words:

"To each there comes in their lifetime a special moment when they are figuratively tapped on the shoulder and offered the chance to do a very special thing, unique to them and fitted to their talents. What a tragedy if that moment finds them unprepared and unqualified for that which could have been their finest hour."

Southern Baptists, this can and should be our finest hour. We must seize the opportunity. This concerns the everlasting eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. He is the King!

Now, in Matthew 6:33 we are challenged to prioritize the kingdom:

"Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness..."

We are encouraged to personalize the kingdom and earnestly pursue the kingdom of God. Jesus tells us in *The Sermon On The Mount* that we are to pray for the kingdom:

"Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (NKJV).

We know that we are to proclaim the kingdom, and that God has called all of us to be heralds of the King and His kingdom. But, in the inaugural sermon of the kingdom, *The Sermon On The Mount* in Matthew 5, 6 and 7, Jesus taught us that we are to practice the kingdom and live as citizens of the kingdom of God. *The Sermon On The Mount* has been called the *Constitution* of the kingdom, even the *Magna Carta* of the kingdom. After the initial beatitudes when Jesus describes the characteristics of kingdom citizens, Jesus moves on to explain how the child or citizen of the kingdom is to live.

I found that seeking to describe or define the kingdom of God can be difficult. That is why Jesus often spoke of the mysteries of the kingdom, and told stories to illustrate the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God has been defined as the visible manifestation and application of the rule of Jesus Christ in our lives.

But, the kingdom is not so much defined as it is to be demonstrated. That is why Jesus gave us two powerful word pictures that describe who the kingdom citizen is, how we're to live, and what we're to do. Those powerful metaphors are found in Matthew 5:13. Jesus said:

13 *"You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor, how should it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men. 14 You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. 15 Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. 16 Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven"* (NKJV).

Jesus uses two common, ordinary substances to tell us how we are to engage our culture and maximize our influence for the King of the kingdom in our own generations. There are two simple truths that are profound—you can be salt and light.

When I was a little boy growing up in First Baptist Church of Conway, Arkansas, some of my fondest memories were enjoying the Sunbeam Band. I was a Sunbeam! How many of you were Sunbeams?

A Sunbeam I will be.

A Sunbeam I will be.

A Sunbeam for Jesus.

A Sunbeam I will be.

That little truth captured my heart and imagination a long time ago. I might be just a little sunbeam or a small pinch of salt, but my life can make a difference eternally for the kingdom of God. Because the world is a decaying and dark place, our salt and light is absolutely necessary. God has called every Christian, every church, and the Southern Baptist Convention to use our influence for the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus. We are living in an ever-darkening and increasingly decaying world. In particular, we are living in a time when it appears that man is inventing new ways to demonstrate his sinful depravity. We see the decay now more than ever. Humanity, in spite of the advances in medicine, media, technology, and science, is becoming more corrupt and contaminated by sin. This should not surprise it, because Paul tells us in 2 Timothy 3:13 that in the last days:

"Evil men and impostors will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived" (NKJV).

This is a decaying and darkening culture, dangerous and deadly times, when evil and the works of evil men will become more evil. Just when you think you have seen or heard it all, something else explodes, describing or demonstrating the enormity of evil in our times: for every crime there now seems to be a greater crime; for immorality there seems to be now greater immorality; if we have war, there seems to be greater war; if there's perversion, there seems to be greater perversion. Everything is becoming worse and worse as we spiral downward into decadence, decay, and darkness. General Omar Bradley in his armistice speech of 1948 said this:

"We have grasped the mystery of the atom but we've forgotten The Sermon on the Mount. Our world has achieved brilliance, without conscience. Our world is a world of nuclear giants and ethical pygmies."

At the end of the twentieth century, there was some sense of optimism in America regarding our future. We were certainly flourishing economically, and the stock market was soaring. Our national security seemed impregnable, but then came 9/11. We were barely in to the twenty-first century when our world exploded. America was attacked, and once again we recognized the face of evil, and the weight of sin. If you doubt the enormity of evil, then read Romans 1. It reads like headlines in the local newspapers.

So what are we to do? Some would say we should pack it in, go to our churches, worship, and wait for the next bus to heaven. Some would say the world is going to hell, and there's not

anything that we can do about it. I strongly disagree! There is something we can and must do about it—for future generations, and our own children and grandchildren. For their sake and for the kingdom of God, we must make a difference for the cause of our King.

Now, if we're going to make a difference, then we must be different. I know that's an obvious statement; yet, it seems there is so little difference between the way professing Christians live today, and the way the world lives. For example, our divorce rate is as high as the divorce rate outside the church and outside the kingdom of God.

The way we live and behave is viewed by many to be no different than the way of this world. But, Peter tells us in 1 Peter 2:9 that we've been called out of darkness into the kingdom of Jesus, which is the kingdom of holiness and righteousness. We are to seek first His kingdom and His righteousness. We do that, not by retreating into some Christian subculture, but by penetrating the decay of our culture and illuminating the darkness of our culture with the mission and vision of our King.

It seems that in our time, the world wants to hear every view except our view, and then they have the audacity to blame the problems of the culture and society on us. We have been called, in recent days, terrorists and bigots. "You are the problem," they say, "and you are the national scapegoat." That's okay because it reminds me of Israel when Ahab the wicked king and idolater said to Elijah, "You are the troubler of Israel," and Elijah shot back, "It's not me, it's you, O king. You are the troubler of Israel because of your idolatry." We face opposition—even our missionaries experience persecution around the world because of Christian faith. But, we will not retreat or run from the battle.

Boniface, who is the great Celtic missionary of yesteryear, said this:

*"Let us stand fast in what is right and prepare our souls for trial. Let us neither be dogs who do not bark, nor silent onlookers, nor paid servants who run away before the wolf. Instead, where the battle rages let us find ourselves there. Let us **run towards the roar of the battle**. That is where Christ's most glorious victories shall be won."*

We will not retreat and we will not relent, but we will run to the roar of our King and His battle, and we will win the day. May God give us the lion heart of our King. Southern Baptists, let's run to the roar! Paul said, "You are the message." When Jesus said, "*You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world*," He used the emphatic **you**, as if He were putting His finger on our noses and saying **you**, emphatically **you**, yes **you**, be salt and light. And He is saying to you, and to Southern Baptists around the world, be salt and be light.

How do we do that?

1. As **SALT** we are to **PENETRATE** a decaying culture. Today we use salt on the table, but in the day of Jesus it was used very differently. Salt was used in the ancient world as a preservative. There was no refrigeration, so they would take salt and rub it into meat or rub it into fish if there was a big catch on the Sea of Galilee. They would rub the salt solutions in, and then carry it to the market. Salt must penetrate to be effective. Rather than keeping our faith to ourselves, it is to be public. It is always private and personal, but it is also public.

There are forces that would attempt to silence us saying, "Don't intrude on our lives, and don't suggest that our lifestyle or our way of life is wrong." They argue that truth is relative or subjective, and they say, "Don't intrude upon our schools, don't bring your faith to work, and don't talk about your Christianity." They tell us, "Just keep it to yourself... just keep it in your saltshaker and in your sanctuary. Don't try to convert anyone." But we cannot resist the rub and the call of God to penetrate our world.

It's a scary thought to consider what the world would be like without the preservative of God's church, His people, and His kingdom. We're told that in the final hours of human history, Jesus will come for His church and take us away to glory. Then, the preserving and protecting agency of God's people will be gone. And according to the book of Revelation, the great tribulation will come, and all hell will break loose on earth. Satan will rule, the antichrist will be in power, and the world will get what it's always wanted—life without God and the King. The Restraint will one day be removed, as Paul said in 2 Thessalonians 2:7:

"The mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only He who now restrains will do so until He is taken out of the way" (NKJV).

Can you imagine the moral condition of our world if it were not for Bible-believing, kingdom-living Christians? Can you imagine where we would be, for example, on the abortion issue in our times, were it not for the salty influence and penetration of God's people? This is a rotting world and we must penetrate the decadent of our times. I'm not talking about simply making better men through social programs. We know that more education, more legislation, and even electing the right president will not change the world or our culture. There is only one way to change the world, and it is by changing people's hearts through the life-changing, unique, and only message of truth—the message of Jesus Christ. The kingdom will not come by electing better public officials; the cultural and moral solution of our times is a salt solution. You, Christian, must be salt.

2. Not only does salt penetrate, **SALT IRRITATES**, stings, and is like an antiseptic. When I was a kid, I would skin my knee, and my mother would come with a bottle of red stuff that was called Mercurochrome. If it was really bad, she'd come at me with the iodine bottle. Do any of you remember that? That stuff was liquid fire, and she would always say, "If it stings and hurts—it helps." I don't know if I ever really believed that, but I do know that salt stings, and the influence of salt stings a wounded world.

3. **SALT** not only stings, it **STIMULATES**. Salt is a seasoning agent that brings out the flavor and freshness of food. As salt, we are to season and flavor our lives with the real joy that we know in Jesus, and the grace of our God who is in us. Jesus has called us to be salt, to be flavorful. It's not the bland leading the bland, but flavorful, fresh believers full of the Spirit of God pouring out the salty, tasty, and fresh love and grace of God.

I was behind someone the other day at one of these coffee shops where you can get all kinds of drinks and coffee, and this particular person ordered a non-fat, no sugar, decaf coffee. And I thought to myself—why? Where's the zip? Where's the flavor? Where's the life in that? And we have to ask that same question of ourselves sometimes. There are too many decaffeinated Christians in our world today. But, salt will stimulate thirst, and it will season.

Are we making people thirsty for God? Whether it is a stinging rebuke or a season of flavor, we are to influence our world. Salt penetrates, irritates, and stimulates. Therefore, we live salty lives as believers and followers of Christ. The one commonality of whether salt penetrates, irritates, or stimulates the thirst is that it must make contact in order to fulfill its purpose.

Throughout this year, I have been overjoyed to hear of the contact "salty" Southern Baptists are making in the world through intentional evangelism within our churches, training people in personal witness, unleashing the laity, and mobilizing. Our president of the United States talks about mobilizing armies of compassion across America and around the world. I pray that God will help us as Southern Baptists to mobilize armies of compassion, to get out of our sanctuaries and into the streets as salty believers sharing Jesus Christ.

As believers, if we lose our saltiness, we're worth nothing. There are two main ways that we lose our saltiness:

One is **BY COMPROMISE**, when salt becomes diluted with other things. Perhaps in Jesus' time, salt became diluted when it was thrown out the door on the dirty street path. When we lose our distinctiveness and purity because of compromise, either in our personal lives or in our doctrinal lives, we are not worth our salt. That's why I'm so thankful that this Southern Baptist Convention has determined, without compromise, to seek the purity of faith and the holiness and righteousness that is ours in Jesus Christ. We preach His salty truth without compromise, but with courage and conviction.

Another way that we lose saltiness is **BY CONTAINMENT**. Perhaps the biggest way is by containing the salt, and keeping it in one place. Too many see the church as one huge saltshaker that we call sanctuaries, or worship centers. So, we gather together, the salt salting the salt, the light lighting up the light, and containment keeping the salt all in one place rather than penetrating the culture. Containment keeps us from fulfilling the mission and the vision of the kingdom of God. As salt we are to penetrate a decaying culture.

As **LIGHT** we are to **ILLUMINATE** a dark culture. You, yes you, Jesus said:

"...are the light of the world."

You, emphatically you, should illuminate and radiate in a dark culture for Christ. We have a mission and a ministry of illumination to light the night, to be radiant and real. How are we to do that? How are we to be light in an ever increasingly dark culture? We do that **BY BEING CONSPICUOUS**. Jesus said a light is like a city, a brilliant and beautiful city set on a hill. Perhaps you've seen those cities across Israel—little towns, hamlets, and cities on hills lighting the night. (*And, on a side note, we need to pray for the peace of Jerusalem in these days.*)

Jesus must have pointed to one of those cities and said:

"...like a city set on a hill."

He said we are to be like a light or a candle on a candlestick that is there for everyone to see it. We are to be conspicuous in our witness. We're to be audiovisual for Jesus Christ so everyone can see and hear the message, and shine with the light of Christ.

In the first century, there was a young terrorist by the name of Saul. He persecuted and murdered Christians. One day as he was partnering with persecutors to kill Stephen and finally shut him up, he listened as Stephen delivered a powerful, salty message about the truth that is only found in Jesus Christ. Then, he watched and held the cloaks of those who stoned him. But, as Stephen was dying and the stones were bludgeoning his body, Acts 7 tells us that his face shone like the face of an angel. He died glowing in the presence of Jesus who was standing at the right hand of the Father. He looked into the face of Jesus, and he glowed with the glory of God. This is a beautiful picture of how we are to shine, glowing not glaring, but glowing on our countenances and most especially in our character with the light of God. Jesus said:

"I am the light of the world."

And then He said:

"You are the light of the world."

We make the connection, according to 2 Corinthians 4:6, in this way:

"For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (NKJV).

When we bathe our hearts and souls in the presence of our King day-by-day, the glow of His presence and the character of His life are formed in us, and people will see the love of Jesus

and the light of our Savior. They will see it in our faces as we articulate and communicate the powerful message. I don't understand how people can be ashamed of the gospel of our King. Pardon me if I just don't get it. How can someone say he is a follower of the One who said, "*I am the way and the truth and the light*," and never tell anyone? Those who live in the light of His presence share the light of His love and the power of His presence with others. Now, I'm not talking about turning the spotlight on us, because that would be self-righteousness. We need to get out of the spotlight and turn our personal agenda over to the kingdom agenda and let the King get in the spotlight. We're to shine so they can see Jesus, so the Father may be glorified, Jesus magnified, and the kingdom multiplied. We are to be conspicuous.

If we are to be light in a darkening culture we are to also **BE CONSISTENT** so, as Jesus said:

"...they may see your good works and glorify the Father in heaven."

"Kalos" — good works! Jesus went about, according to the Scripture, doing good. You know the world does not expect perfection of us, but they should expect consistency in us, 24/7 shining for Him. Let me give you a few illustrations as to how Southern Baptists are shining and glowing for God.

At the end of Operation Iraqi Freedom, who was first in line, in the name of Jesus, with packages of love and food for the Iraqi people? Our Southern Baptist missionaries and missionary personnel—that's who! They were right there, being salt and light in the darkness.

I wrote our chaplains before the battles began in Iraq to let them know Southern Baptists were praying for them. We received a wonderful response from our Southern Baptist chaplains serving not only in this mission, but also all over the world. Our chaplains were there in the battle. They would run to the roar. What were they doing? They were shining for Jesus, and salting the culture around them. The military culture and many of our young soldiers came to faith in Jesus Christ before and during the battle because of the faithful witness of Southern Baptist chaplains who were there doing good in Jesus' name. God bless them and we salute them.

I never will forget the story of Private James Keil, who was baptized there in the desert in a hole in the ground. Bottled water was poured into that hole in the ground in the desert. He professed his faith in Jesus Christ, and was baptized as a follower of Christ by a chaplain. Then, on that fateful night in the opening salvos of the war, he and the maintenance group that turned the wrong way were ambushed, and Private James Keil went out into eternity. But, he went out into eternity with Jesus Christ in his heart forever, because God's men were there sharing the love, hope, and gospel of Jesus. That's being salt and light.

America was attacked on 9/11 and our world was rocked, our nation was terrorized, and New York City was left in shambles. I will never forget going to ground zero and seeing the devastation. If you saw it, you know that it takes your breath away to know the pain, loss, and suffering—families whose dads didn't come home and whose lives are forever changed because of the attack of murderous thugs and terrorists. But Southern Baptists were there being salt and light in the aftermath.

Our North American Mission Board mobilized hundreds of men and women to go to ground zero. Our own minister of missions, Ross Robinson, went with them. Ross could hardly talk without weeping for the next month, having seen the work of evil in that place. But, Southern Baptists were there in the love and name of Jesus, loving families, taking care of kids, and most of all sharing the good news of Jesus Christ, the gospel. So, several weeks after the initial crush of that ministry, the *New York Times* ran an article that said:

*"In the aftermath of 9/11...send us more of those Southern Baptists.
They have come up here and made a difference in our city."*

Those are Christians being salt and light. It's better to light a candle than to curse the darkness. Every ounce and every inch of me wants to shout out at the darkness and the depravity that we see around us. The lives of little babies have been lost, an entire generation. An entire generation, my generation, has been impacted by two events. In 1963, there was death in the streets of Dallas, and the killing of John Kennedy changed the generation. Then, in 1973, Roe v. Wade occurred, and the darkness set in. So what are we to do? We become salt and light, we work for legislation, and we will continue to do that.

We're thankful that our president is ready to sign a ban on partial birth abortion. We're making inroads, and abortions are down. But, the best way, in my opinion, is not to out-shout the darkness, but to out-live the darkness. Pregnancy centers all across Southern Baptist life have started to be a light in the darkness. Men and women on the cutting edge of this dramatic social issue of our times are changing a culture of death to a culture of life and bringing men, women, boys, and girls into the kingdom of God. Jesus lives in us in order to accomplish His good work through us. Be consistent.

BE COMPELLING. A light brings welcome and warmth, and it shows the way out of a dark place. That's why we're to shine in the darkness, and the darker it gets, the closer we need to get to the darkness.

O'Henry, the famed short story writer, died, and his last words were:

"Turn on the light; I don't wanna go home in the dark."

How many in our world are saying, "Turn on the light I don't want to go home alone in the darkness?" We must be compelling in shining the light. Remember that the church of Jesus Christ is not a safe harbor, not a club or a resort, and not a place to bask in the sun, get a good tan, or look good and go home. The church of Jesus Christ, a colony of the kingdom, is a lighthouse on a dark and dangerous shore. I thank God for the privilege of simply being just a little light, just a sunbeam for Jesus. You may say, "Well, I can't do much, I'm just a little light."

Oswald Chambers, the great devotional writer said:

*"Never allow the thought that I'm of no use where I am;
you certainly are of no use where you're not."*

You're of use where you are.

Finally, **BE CONSUMED.** Just as a candle burns and consumes itself, we are to be consumed in shining and sharing the light. John the Baptist described himself as a burning and shining light. Why? Because he said, "Jesus must increase and I must decrease." John burned, he shone, and he burned out for God. Ultimately, his stand for truth and righteousness cost him his life.

In these days we need to max out for God. This is not a time for less salt, limited light, or weak, emaciated faith. We're to focus on the King and His kingdom everyday. It is to be our magnificent obsession, our clear focus, our compelling mission, and our holy ambition. When we are real, we will be radiant, and the world will know Jesus is Lord because our life is His life.

What will they do? Praise the lamp? Praise the light? No! God has not called us to be beautiful chandeliers, but simply to be a light on a porch inviting people to find their way to Jesus. God may have put you in a distant, dark, or dangerous place, and the greater the night, the greater your need to be there. We must not put our light under a bushel. So the question is, will

Southern Baptists shine and salt the culture, the extreme darkness, and the excessive decay of our times? I believe we need church leaders, pastors, and believers in our pews to adopt the kingdom agenda and mobilize companies of salt and light around the world. We need to grip every day with the mission and message of Jesus. We must be full throttle for Him in these last days. There's only one plan, one purpose, and one priority for believers in these days, and that is to seek first the King and His kingdom.

Rachel Shupe was a 19-year-old who just completed her first year at Ouachita Baptist University in Arkadelphia, Arkansas. On the road between Arkadelphia and Dallas, she stepped into eternity suddenly in a car accident. Every parent's worst nightmare is to hear of the death of a child—the accident, the call in the night, or that call in the darkness. So Deb and I, along with many others in our church family, were sitting together at the funeral service of Rachel Shupe. We were holding hands. We were quiet. I was rather numb to the whole idea of a 19-year-old, beautiful Christian girl taken out. Then, a young professor from Ouachita stood to bring a tribute to Rachel Shupe. In his tribute he described a study group in a class of his, and a project. He said he asked the students to write and keep a diary. Then, he asked them to write a prayer which would describe their purpose in life. What would be, in a single sentence, he asked them, your purpose and prayer for your life? And he read the words Rachel Shupe had written. She wrote:

"My purpose and prayer is to make daily decisions which have eternal significance."

When I heard that, sitting stunned and silent in that funeral service, I thought to myself, "That is it!" That is the call of the kingdom, and the compelling cry of our King. It is that every day we would live in the light of eternity and make daily decisions that have eternal weight, significance, and consequence.

I want to live and die like that. I am thankful that Southern Baptist missionaries like those three missionaries who were killed in the line of duty for Jesus Christ made daily decisions that have eternal significance. I'm so thankful that my friend Rick Ferguson, a wonderful pastor who perished in a car accident last summer, lived his life making daily decisions that have eternal significance. So, whether you're a student, missionary, or pastor...**YOU!** Yes **YOU!** All of you, and all of us, must be salt in a decaying culture and light in a darkening culture. May God help us to pray the words of David in 1 Chronicles 29:11 that says: "*Yours O Lord is the kingdom!*"

It's not our kingdom. It's not the kingdom of Southern Baptists. It is the kingdom of our risen Redeemer.

Yours O Lord is the kingdom.

Let's all stand together and repeat the words that our Lord taught us in a prayer known as *The Lord's Prayer*. Let's pray out loud that the kingdom of God would come.

"Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done On earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, As we forgive our debtors. And do not lead us into temptation, But deliver us from the evil one. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever" (NKJV).

Again!

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever.

We look forward to that day when our King comes for us, and the kingdom of our God and His Christ shall rule and reign. And that kingdom will cover the earth as the waters cover the seas. Until that day and kingdom come, may we be salt and light.