

President Frank Page's Convention Address

**2008 Southern Baptist Convention
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Recognize the Signs

It was the day after Christmas.

Small children played while villagers went about their usual chores – cooking, washing, farming, fishing. Merchants in the market were displaying their wares in hopes of getting a good price for them. Adults were discussing, even arguing about, politics and religion. The blazing sun filling the clear sky brought perspiration to the brow. The cool water that perpetually lapped at the shore beckoned.

On this day, however, something was amiss. At first just a few people noticed it. Word spread quickly, however, and soon it was on everyone's lips. Did it mean what they thought? Could it really be happening? What should they do?

Elders hurriedly conferred and made their decision. They had to take the signs seriously. After all, they knew their history and remembered what had happened to those who had previously ignored them. Hoping for the best but fearing the worst, they issued their order: Head for high ground.

Within minutes, a giant wall of water surged across the village, leveling everything in its path. The Asian tsunami of December 26, 2004 had struck. One of the deadliest disasters in history, it killed hundreds of thousands of people and caused massive damage across thousands of miles.

On the island of Simeulue, however, the death toll was reportedly not nearly as severed as elsewhere. Incredibly, only seven of 78,000 inhabitants died, even though the tsunami hit there just eight minutes after an earthquake in the Indian Ocean west of Sumatra, Indonesia, spawned it.

Why? Because a century earlier, another earthquake-induced tsunami had hit the village and survivors of that event had passed down word of the warning signs—a series of larger-than-normal waves, for example, accompanied by unusual quantities of marine life on the beach and a marked recession of the sea.

These villagers recognized the signs and fled for their lives while they still could. Their vigilance and responsiveness paid off. People living in other areas that had even more time to respond but did not, however, suffered horrific casualties, with populations of entire towns being obliterated.

To recognize the signs was the singular cause for the physical salvation of that island. Will we recognize the signs that will keep our Convention from fading into serious decline and irrelevancy? That is the question before us today. We can argue about statistics, but anyone who lives in the real world and travels the nation and sees the churches knows we are in trouble. If things do not change, by 2030, we will be proud to have 20,000 churches.

Turn with me to **John 4:7-30**.

Before we look at the reaction of the woman, let us see that there is little wonder that the disciples were in a state of amazement when they returned and found Jesus talking to the woman. It is also interesting that however staggered the disciples might have been, they did not question Jesus about it. They had learned that while sometimes Jesus did surprising things, those things were not to be questioned. While that is a sermon in itself, let us look at the message in this story of the Samaritan woman.

HER EXPERIENCE BEGAN, AS SHOULD OURS, WITH BEING COMPELLED TO SEE HERSELF AS SHE REALLY WAS. She was confronted by Christ, and she found

out that He knew all about her. Her past came flooding forth. While it hurt to hear it, the way Jesus spoke was not like the others. When others dredged up her past, there was condemnation. With Jesus, there was understanding. She was forced to see herself as she really was. Look at vv. 17-18.

When we are confronted by Christ, we see ourselves as we really are. **All of the pretenses, excuses, outward appearances—all of them are invisible to Him.** He compels us to take an honest look at ourselves, for He is truth. It may hurt badly, but it is necessary for change to occur. Our natural tendency is to run from any pain. Sometimes, it is the only way to wholeness.

How is it that we as modern day Christians have become so adept at avoiding the realization of what is truly happening in our hearts and lives? I believe one of the greatest avoidance techniques is **by relying on a substitute righteousness** such as that which is found in cultural Christianity 101. As long as we can delude ourselves and convince ourselves into thinking that we are spiritually OK because we are meeting the demands of cultural Christianity, then we can avoid looking at the truth. Keep things shallow, keep things on the surface, and don't dare look deep inside yourself. This is cultural Christianity at its best and at the same time at its worst. **It is used as a substitute for substance.** It is a grave into which many have fallen.

Is it possible that as a Convention we have used the same avoidance technique? Could we rely on a substitute righteousness? We have the same tendency to avoid and evade the real issues. For example, we like to blame our decline on in-fighting or the failure of a conservative resurgence to bring about an upturn in baptisms. While these are all factors that do impact our denominational lives, the reality is that individuals and churches are the ones who are in decline. We are the ones who are comparing ourselves to the wrong standards, ignoring God's call and failing to be relevant to a culture that sees us as representatives of death, not life.

When the quickening power of God's Holy Spirit begins to speak to your heart, if you are devoted to avoidance techniques, then you know how to deal with it. Rationalization immediately begins in which you tell yourself that you are just as good as anyone else. That **rationalization and comparison** convince you that there is no need to listen to that still, small voice. **Avoidance also comes by the nourishment of negative thoughts** which keep you from dealing with the true inadequacies of your own life. Where do you think this tendency for rationalization and avoidance comes from? This Samaritan woman was in awe of the power of Christ. For He compelled her to see herself as she really was. Painful, though it may be, if personal revival is to occur, it must begin with honesty. I am a part of the problem.

It is time to stop the utilization of rationalization and comparison and feel that because we are bigger, or because we have had a slight upturn in attendance, that all is well. The truth is that we are doing less to impact our culture than ever before. When one looks at the number of seminarians wishing to go into traditional churches, the serious decline of the traditional church, the lack of denominational emphasis upon church transformation, and our tendency to debate the number of angels on the head of a pin while our society is crumbling around us can no longer be ignored. I believe Christ is calling us to take an honest look at the reality of what is happening in our individual lives and in our own churches. Blame the denomination if you wish. The reality is the problem starts with me. This woman was forced to see herself as she really was. It is time that we did the same.

THE SAMARITAN WOMAN WAS OVERWHELMED BY CHRIST'S ABILITY TO SEE INTO HER HEART. Not only did Christ make her see herself as she was, but He was able to look unhindered into her heart. Earlier in the chapter, we see that Jesus knew her life, but more important, He saw in her heart an emptiness caused by worshipping other gods. Yes, He saw into her heart, and she was amazed.

It is told that once a small girl heard a sermon by C. H. Spurgeon, and whispered to her mother at the end of it, "Mother, how does he know what goes on in our house?" Have you ever felt that?

It is the power of Christ Jesus to see into the depths of the human heart. Not only does He see the evil of it, but also the person that you can become. He is like the surgeon who sees the diseased part, but who also sees the health which will follow when the diseased part is removed.

This Samaritan woman was in dialogue with the Son of God. While the Scripture does not tell all of what happened in her heart, I believe her transformation occurred as Jesus spoke to her in verse 26. After a fascinating time of repartee, Christ gets to the heart of the matter. He relates to the struggling, hurting, sinful human being that He is the one who can bring meaning and order to her life. I believe that it is at this point that He beautifully revealed Himself to her and she accepted Him as King of her life. He sees us as we truly are, but fortunately He is able to see past the hurt, the sin, and the failure and to see the person that we can become.

One thing that I have heard across this Convention over the last few years is that some people are seeing hope for the first time in years. I beg of you not to lose hope. While I have tried my best to bring unity, to point our Convention back to the basics of soul-winning and missions, to call us to a begging of God for spiritual awakening and revival, the ultimate answer is to know that Christ is our only hope. Just as He was the only hope for this Samaritan woman, He is the only hope for our Convention. Will we follow a Jesus agenda or not? Will we treat others as Jesus treated others? Will we relate to our contemporary culture the way Jesus related to his? Will we bravely, boldly, and sensitively share the good news that Jesus saves, and only Jesus saves?

THE FIRST INSTINCT OF THE SAMARITAN WOMAN WAS TO SHARE HER DISCOVERY. Having discovered this amazing Man, she was compelled to share her discovery with the others. She was so excited that she even left her water pot. She had found "living water." See that exciting story in vv. 28-30. Now look with me down to see the results of this sharing in vv. 29-42. Isn't that exciting? **This woman who had been the talk of the town now encouraged the town to talk...about Jesus.** This woman who had been the source of moral failure for some now became the source of spiritual good news for many. This woman who had been a tribute to wrong living now pointed people to right living.

First to find and then to tell are the two great steps of the Christian life. I believe that our Convention needs to fall in love with the Lord all over again. I believe that if we do, then there will be renewed passion to tell others about Him. Will you be a part of this great movement of falling in love with the Lord Jesus all over again? Yes, it would bring about a Great Commission Resurgence because we will fall in love with the One who spoke the Great Commission. Yes, baptisms will increase, because we will fall in love with the One who told us to baptize all nations. Yes, we will see the gospel of Christ taken to every man, woman, boy, and girl on the face of this earth, because we will fall in love with the One who gave us that mission.

The woman at the well found her life changed forever by a conversation with Christ. I believe that our world is looking for men and women whose lives have been radically transformed by a conversation with Christ. Let us live out the relationship that we claim to have with our Lord Jesus. Please remember the signs that were recognized by the elders of the village of Simeulue. Let us recognize the signs that are before us and fall in love with Jesus again and follow His commands and His way so that we might see a brighter day and save our island.