

President Bryant Wright's Address

LEAVING YOUR FIRST LOVE
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Revelation 2:1-7

Turn in your Bible to Revelation chapter 2. We'll be reading verses 1-4 to introduce our study today, which is Revelation 2, verses 1-7. And recognizing these are not just the words of a man, but most of all this is the written Word of God, let us stand in honor of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, as we read the Word of God. Revelation 2, verse 1.

To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands, say this: 'I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot tolerate evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false; and you have perseverance and have endured for My name's sake, and have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have left your first love.

Let's pray together.

Father God, as always when we open Your Word, we can open the Word with anticipation that You, the God of the Universe, are eager to speak to all of us right where we live. And today, we ask for You to speak to us individually. We ask for you to speak to us corporately as churches and as the Body of Christ as Southern Baptist Christians. Father, may You speak to us and may we receive Your Word with an open heart, with a mind that is in tune with you, with a will that is willing to trust You and follow You wherever You may lead us to go. Father, may You speak in a very powerful way that only You can do when the Holy Spirit empowers the Word of God to speak to our heart and lives. And may all that is said here be centered on You through the person of Jesus Christ. For it is in Christ's name that we pray. Amen.

All of us who are in full-time ministry have been in conversation with folks who come to us when their marriage is on the rocks. And we hear comments from them like, "I just don't love him anymore," "The spark is gone," or "My feelings are dead." And in almost every case when a marriage is on the rocks, it's not like it just began over night. A marriage falls into trouble because gradually, over time, the husband and wife are not prioritizing one another as the primary human relationship here on this earth. And over time, when that happens, the love can grow cold. And that person really feels separated from the one that they originally loved very much.

And it's really quite similar in our relationship with Jesus Christ. It's very rare that we suddenly rebel against God and want to have nothing to do with God. But what tends to happen to all of us is over time, gradually, often subtly, we begin to drift away from God. He begins to no longer be the priority of our life. There are other priorities that creep in. Our heart begins to grow cold towards the Lord. When that occurs, we find our self leaving the first love of our life—that is Jesus Christ.

Jesus speaks to this when He speaks to the church at Ephesus. And let's understand this about the church at Ephesus. It was a great church. It is no accident that it is the first church mentioned in the book of Revelation of the seven churches of Revelation. Ephesus was a leading city in its day. And they had been blessed with strong pastoral leadership. And it's very interesting that as Jesus Christ addresses the church at Ephesus, He begins with words of affirmation. I really believe that the words that Jesus shares with the church of Ephesus could very easily

be the words that He desires to share with Christians who are a part of the Southern Baptist Convention.

First, the affirmation. In verse 2, He says, “I know your deeds.” The church at Ephesus was a church filled with good ministries. Now think for a moment about the Southern Baptist Convention. Think with me about the thousands, literally thousands, of ministries that are doing so much good in our local missions fields as well as mission fields around the world. Think of the hundreds and hundreds of ministries in all of our 45,000 churches. And then there are hundreds of associations, and then over 40 state conventions. We have thousands and thousands of North American Mission Board full-time missionaries and thousands and thousands of full-time IMB missionaries.

We have seen from the video this morning about how NAMB has specialized in disaster relief. And really just in the first half of this year, the first six months, they have distributed over three hundred and fifty thousand meals in disaster relief. Good deeds and good ministry. Our International Mission Board has distributed on an annual basis over 8 billion dollars of hunger and relief supplies to people in need around the world.

GuideStone cares for widows and very many bivocational pastors who had no form of retirement, and are just struggling to get by. And through Mission:Dignity, seeking to reach out and honor those who often served in the crossroad ministries all across the land, are caring for them in their retirement. We could just go on and on and on with one example after another about the good deeds that occur in the Southern Baptist Convention and the churches that are a part of our Convention.

But Jesus goes on. He says,

I know your toil and your perseverance. (verse 3) And you have perseverance, and you have endured for my name sake and you have not grown weary.

At this point in Ephesus' life, the church had existed for about 40 years. They had endured hardship of growing up in a pagan culture, of being a new church plant in a culture that was overwhelmingly involved in idol worship. And for 40 years, they had toiled. They had persevered. They had not quit.

The Southern Baptist Convention, formed in 1845 in Augusta, Georgia, has survived Civil War, two World Wars, the Great Depression, the recent years of the economic setback that we've been dealing with, times of great abundance and prosperity, and over the last 50 years the most rapid social and moral change in the history of American Culture. We have persevered. But Jesus goes on. He says,

And you cannot tolerate evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false. (verse 6) Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

Now if there's one thing true and a great affirmation that Jesus has about the church at Ephesus, it's that they upheld sound doctrine. They would not tolerate those who were false teachers, who were bringing great harm and great poison to the body of Christ. They were strong in their doctrine of the true faith. And certainly this is something that Southern Baptists have done that is really contrary to some mainline denominations in American culture that have chosen to take one pro-sin position after another because there is no longer the basis of the authority of the perfectly true written Word of God.

Southern Baptists did something historic. They said, “We will not tolerate this. We will not tolerate false teaching. We will not have anything to do with false teaching.” Jesus Christ is very clear in what He says about the Nicolaitans, a false doctrine, a heresy in the early church, that He hated the deeds of the Nicolaitans—all their sexual immorality, all their idolatry that came out of the false doctrine that they were teaching.

Southern Baptists, years ago, decided we must be true to the perfectly true written Word of God. And in our seminaries, it is unbelievable what has happened over the last 30 years.

I was a seminary student in the late 70's. It was the most miserable experience of my life. I remember time after time, day after day, going to class after class where the sacred things of the faith were belittled and were mocked—even something as ground central to our faith as the resurrection—skepticism and doubt. I remember walking through the hallways of Southern Seminary and just silently screaming to myself, “This place is not going to steal my soul. Lord, help me to hold on to the faith. Help me to hold on to the trustworthiness of the Word of God in this vast sea of theological mush.”

And what is so amazing to me, today, it is an absolute miracle to me today, in visiting our seminaries and seeing the sound doctrine in all six of our seminaries. Seeing the passion for Christ and the passion for missions and the passion for church planting among our seminary students—it is an absolute miracle what has occurred in the life of Southern Baptists. And for that I am grateful.

But then Jesus says this. After words of affirmation, words about good deeds, about toil and perseverance, about upholding sound doctrine, Jesus says this,

I have this against you, that you have left your first love.

Now, one of the things that Anne and I have discovered as we counsel with folks who are struggling in their marriage—and they make a comment like, “You know, I just don’t love this person any more. The spark is gone. I no longer have feelings for them.” Both of us have learned to ask, “Well, just tell me. Tell me, for a moment, what was it that caused you to fall in love with that person. What was it like? Can you just tell me for a second? What was it like when you fell in love with that person?” It’s amazing the response.

Jesus Christ talks about the church at Ephesus leaving their first love. And I really believe in all my heart, if there’s any message that God is desiring to say to us as individuals, to us as local churches, to us as a Southern Baptist Convention, it’s that we have left our first love of Jesus Christ. And how does it come about?

Well, very simply, other priorities begin to be a bigger priority in our life than our relationship with Jesus. Let’s talk about some of the challenges we face on a daily basis. Number one—materialism. I really believe that the number one idol within the lives of our people and in the lives of our churches is materialism. When you consider that studies have shown that less than two and a half percent of every dollar is given to the Lord’s work by evangelical Christians in America today. What it clearly says to us is, “No matter how much our people profess that they love Jesus, they really love their money more than Jesus.” There’s no way when a person is continually stealing from God that they can claim to have a real love for Jesus Christ. Money, possessions have become a priority.

Years ago, our whole Sunday offering was stolen from a safe in our business office one Sunday afternoon—the whole Sunday offering. Now I want you to know there was outrage all throughout Johnson Ferry Baptist Church. People were appalled! How in the world can somebody rob the church and rob from God like that? I heard the comments all week long. I just kind of silently smiled and looked forward to preaching the next Sunday on stealing from God from Malachi 3, verses 8 through 10.

And I reminded our congregation. I said, “Many of you have been outraged that thieves broke into the business office, stole the entire Sunday offering, but the fact is the overwhelming majority of you that call yourself Christians, rob from God every single Sunday. God doesn’t call you a thief, which is kind of like a high class robbery, He calls you a robber—someone who is continually stealing from God.” And there is no way, no matter how much we profess, no matter how much we do and serve in ministries, that we can truly claim to love Jesus Christ if we steal from God on a regular basis. Materialism to me is our number one idol in our churches.

But then secondly, hedonism. There's no doubt that our culture is pervasive in influencing those of us in the church. There is no doubt that the number of men struggling with addiction to Internet pornography has reached epidemic proportions within the pews of our churches. And there is no way that there can be a spiritual fire in our bones, there's no way there could be a spiritual vitality in our churches, when the very spiritual life of those who claim to be followers of Christ is literally suffocated by this addiction to porn.

We think about our teenagers and sexual morality – and how often they are no different than those outside the church. We could go on and on with example after example of this love for pleasure more than a love for Jesus. But there are other temptations as well. There's that incredible lust for the latest up-to-date technology. Some of you are so addicted to your cell phones, you haven't made it ten minutes into this message without checking your messages or your tweets, or whatever it may be – two or three times! As if that is more important than hearing from the Word of God. Wanting to have the latest technology and to stay socially connected through your social network very often becomes the dominant focus of people's lives. And in the process, we leave our first love.

And then there are those who are addicted to talk radio, to blogs, to 24-hour news cycles. You know, I'm very thankful that we have alternative views in the news today, because for much of my life there were no alternative views. It was all one-sided views. But I want you to know, I am greatly concerned about the new idolatry in the church of elevating talk radio or Fox News before the Word of God and the person of Jesus Christ when it comes to worldview. My friends, our worldview is to be shaped by the written Word of God as we understand it in following Jesus Christ.

But that is not all. Very often it is very good things that cause us to leave our first love. Good things like family, like an honest job or work, or even our ministries. Now listen very carefully. Are you listening? I really believe that perhaps the major temptation for anyone who serves in full-time Christian ministry is to begin to confuse their ministry with their relationship with Jesus Christ. After all, what could be more important than doing the work of the Lord? It is a high calling. It is an important calling. We're to be responsible in that calling.

But there is no doubt that it is an easy and constant temptation to confuse our work in ministry with our relationship with Jesus Christ. And let us understand, when that occurs in our life, we're making a family member, we're making a ministry, we're making our work an idol in our life. No one – not our family, not our ministry, not our work – is to come before our relationship with Jesus Christ. He is to be our preeminent concern.

And we think about these examples. We realize we could go on and on. But what is so great about Jesus in this passage is He's like a good doctor. He's not like the prosecuting attorney pointing out all the ways that we fall short. He's like a good doctor. He tells us our problem of leaving our first love, of prioritizing other things or other people before our relationship with Him. And then, like a good doctor, He gives us a cure. Look at what He says in the verse that follows, verse 5. He says,

Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first.

Now I want to ask you to do something for a second. We've talked about comparing our relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ to the relationship in marriage. For those of you who are married, will you think back as I spoke about a little bit earlier, think back to what it was like when you fell in love with your spouse? How did you act? What was it like?

I certainly remember what it was like when I fell in love with Anne. For one thing, I wanted to be with her every single day. Now, for a guy who had never dated anybody seriously all the way through college, all of a sudden I met this beautiful honey, and I wanted to be with her every single day. Matter of fact, as a single guy, it was really making me nervous. So after we'd been dating about three weeks, I said to Anne, "Honey, I believe we need to take a break for a

couple of weeks. It's just getting a little too serious." And she just smiled. She handled it real cool. I saw her twice the next day. When we fall in love, we've got to be with that person.

I even remember a time when I went to see her, to pick her up to go somewhere and she had her hair rolled up. Now her hair is naturally curly. She doesn't roll up her hair anymore, but in those days she was trying to keep it straight. She had big old rollers – the kind about orange-juice-can size. And I've always thought that a woman in public with her hair rolled up is terrible for the environment. It's an ecological disaster. But I called Anne one day, said, "I want you to go with me to this place." She had her hair rolled up. I said, "That's all right." I picked her up with her hair rolled up. Next thing I know, I was kissing on her. Just kissing... couldn't stop. She had her hair rolled up. I mean, you know you got it bad when you're kissing a woman with her hair rolled up. I don't care who she is.

But when we fall in love, it's really an amazing thing. We want to be with that person. I remember beginning to tell Anne, in those early days of our dating, I told her things I had never told anyone, talked to her about my fears, about my anxieties. I talked to her about dreams and hopes for the future—things I had never verbalized to anyone. I wanted to hear what she had to say. I loved listening to what she had to say. I loved spending time with her. I loved introducing her to other people. I wanted them to know her. I wanted them to see what a wonderful honey she was!

And think about it – what it is like when we come to Christ? Would you remember with me for a moment? Everybody? Are you listening? Will you remember for a moment? What was it like when you first came to Christ? What was it like?

I remember I came to Christ as a sixteen year old. I would have told you I was a Christian. I grew up in a wonderful Christian home, very involved in the church. But I went to a Young Life Ranch when I was sixteen years old and for some reason, the Good News of the Gospel of Christ and what Christ had gone through and done for me on the cross – and not just me but all of mankind. I was overwhelmed with it. And I came under great conviction. I realized that even though I would say I was a Christian, I called on God by convenience. I called on Him before a big date, or before a big test, or before a big ball game, but other than that – God let's keep things at arm's length. But when I realized afresh from the story I already knew, what Christ actually went through in taking the penalty of our sins upon Himself, I was overwhelmed with conviction. I wanted to stop using God, and I wanted to follow Christ. I wanted to follow Christ wherever He was leading me to go. And I know for sure that I came to know the Lord at that time in my life. And man—was it joy!

I didn't have an emotional conversion. I was a little disappointed in that. But man, when I got home – the hunger I had to read the Word of God, to study the Word of God, to underline the Word of God. Yes, I had gone to church all my life, but I had never done that on my own. The hunger I had to be in Christian fellowship with others who were growing in their faith, to be in Bible study, to be in worship. The hunger I had to pray about what was on my mind and what was on my heart. The hunger for all that just continued to grow. There was a desire to obey the Word of God. As a very young Christian I remember how self-righteous I was in looking at the church and all the things wrong with the church as I was studying the Word or God, and I was so hoping to obey the Word of God exactly as it says. Maybe you can relate to that.

But I also had a great hunger for my friends in my high school to be introduced to Jesus. Man, more than anything else, those relationships began to change because I wanted them to know Christ, and to know His love, and His salvation, and the gift of eternal life that He could bring. Can you remember what it was like when you first received the love of Christ in faith? Can you remember?

And Jesus goes on by saying, "*Once you remember, realize it's time to repent.*" And realize that repentance is simply a change of mind that leads to a change of direction. In repentance, we come to acknowledge that we have been going down the wrong road of life, and we recognize

that we made a wrong turn, and we want to get it right. So we acknowledge that we've gone the wrong way. We turn to go the right way, to go the way that God is directing us to go. That is what repentance is. Christ says, "When you remember what it was like when you came to know Me as your Lord and Savior, now repent!" And then He says, "Do the things that you did at first."

Well, what do we want to do at first when we come to know the Lord? We want to study the Word. We want to talk to God about everything in prayer. We want to be in Christian fellowship and worship and Bible study, growing with other believers. We want to obey the Word of God. We want to trust God in all the areas of our life. And we want to tell others about the love and the salvation that is found in Jesus Christ.

You see, folks, when we really love the Lord, we're going to begin to love the lost. I want to park on that last one for a few minutes. What tends to happen to all of us, what tends to happen to Bible studies and small groups and local churches is over time, we tend to form our holy huddles. And we begin to self-righteously look at those who are outside of our huddle and condemn them for their lifestyle and all the bad they do—all the while, blind to our self-righteous pride.

We tend in our churches to focus on the 99 sheep in the fold and neglect the one sheep that Christ is concerned about who has gone astray. We tend to become so inward focused on pastoral care of the flock that we forget the mission of the church. Christ is saying, "Look. Do the deed you did at first."

Well what about the Southern Baptist Convention? How were we founded? We were founded on two key issues. One was bad. One was great. One was unstated. One was clearly stated. We were founded in the defense of slavery. It took us 150 years to come to our senses and to apologize and seek the forgiveness of God and to apologize with our African-American friends and to ask their forgiveness for the strain of racism all through our history. Thankfully, it occurred in the mid to late 90's, but it was about 150 years late.

But there is a noble reason for which we were founded, and that is for the propagation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The very first president of the Convention, W. B. Johnson, talked about that haunting Macedonian call from heathen groups all around the world as the Gospel must be taken to every people group on the face of the earth. The reality is, when we love the Lord Jesus Christ with all of our heart, soul, and mind, we are going to love the lost. And the less that we love the Lord Jesus Christ, the less we are going to love the lost and care for them in hopes that they can come to salvation in Jesus Christ.

Now, in this Convention, the Great Commission is front and center of all we're doing. The Great Commission is foundational of why we were formed as a convention of churches. The Great Commission is what Christ calls on us to do in taking the Gospel to every people group on the face of the earth.

And as a part of carrying out what God calls us to do in the Great Commission, there are two major focuses that we are dealing with in this Convention. One is the planting of churches. It began in our pastors' conference—a focus on planting churches especially where there is a great need for new churches because Bible studies and small groups and local churches tend to become inwardly focused over time. There is nothing like starting new classes, starting new Bible studies, starting new small groups, and starting new churches to reach more people for Jesus Christ.

Johnson Ferry has had the privilege to start a lot of churches. And right now, our latest church plant is a church plant that we are engaged in along with 17 other Southern Baptist churches. Another recent church plant, the Cedarcrest Church in North Atlanta, was the one who led us to have a connection to the South Bay Church in the Silicon Valley. And it's so exciting going to that church today.

When Anne and I first visited that church – it's so young from those people working at Google and Microsoft and all the high-tech industries around there – one of the young gals there asked Anne, "Whose parents are y'all, who are you visiting today?" That was very discouraging to recognize that we looked like senior adults in visiting that church that day, but it was very encouraging to see overwhelmingly people under 30 years old flocking into this church from all different ethnic groups, being reached with the Good News of Jesus Christ as 18 Southern Baptist churches are joining together to sponsor that church plant.

Some people feel like their church is too small to be involved in a church plant. You can join with others in your association. You can join with other churches, larger churches that you know of in taking part in a church plant. Everybody can be a part of this because there is no doubt that the growth of the kingdom, the advancement of the kingdom is greatly enhanced through planting new churches.

But there is also a focus in this Convention on really engaging the unreached and unengaged people groups—to really embrace them. We can use the word adopt but the word embrace really describes more what it's about. There is a huge focus in this Convention on embracing unreached and unengaged people groups.

There are over 6,000 unreached people groups on the earth. But understand this about unreached people groups—that's including any nation that has less than 2% of its population being Christian. So a nation like Japan would be considered an unreached people group even though there are churches all throughout that land.

But when we talk about really embracing unreached and unengaged people groups with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, there are 3,800 unreached and unengaged people groups that are still left according to the International Mission Board; 3,800 people groups where, as far as we know, there is no church, there is no mission ministry, there is no witness for Christ of any kind. And a big challenge in this Convention is focused there. And I want to share with you how the Holy Spirit is moving.

When we were having our annual world missions conference at Johnson Ferry earlier this year, I really became burdened that there's just no reason with 2,000 years of having a clear mission from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ of reaching every people group or nation on the face of the earth with the Gospel, there's really no reason today that with the 45,000 churches of the Southern Baptist Convention that we cannot challenge our churches to step forth, to come forth in faith and each church adopt at least one of these unengaged and unreached people groups.

And it just stayed on my heart for a couple of weeks. I couldn't let it go. The more I prayed about it—the more excited I got. But I also realized that our International Mission Board would be central to this. And knowing that they didn't yet have a president, but knowing that Tom Elliff was going to be voted as the new president in a couple of weeks, I just couldn't hold back. I had to talk to him.

And so I called Tom one day knowing that there was no way that churches could ever get a connection with these unreached and unengaged people groups unless the International Mission Board facilitated the process. So, I called him. I said, "Tom, I know you haven't even officially taken office. I think it's going to happen." Thankfully it has happened. And I said, "Tom, this is a big one, but I really want to ask your help and your prayers on this. Over the last couple of weeks, I've been praying about challenging the churches of the Southern Baptist Convention to have at least 3,800 churches to step up to the plate, to adopt at least one people group on the face of the earth—one people group that is unengaged that has not been able to hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ." Silence on the phone.

Now, you know when you're a pastor, and you feel you have a leading and then you venture out on faith. And I want you to know, in that little pause of silence, I was thinking all sort of thoughts. "Does he think this president of the Convention is out of his mind? Just think of all we're going to have to do."

But after that moment of silence, Tom said, “Bryant, you’re not going to believe this. The last two days, I have been talking with the leadership at IMB and sharing with them that I want to challenge the churches of the Southern Baptist Convention to come forth this year and adopt all 3,800 of those unengaged, unreached people groups.

Now, I don’t know about you, but when the Holy Spirit is working in two different places at once and you have no idea it’s going on until the Holy Spirit brings you together—that is exciting. You think about what God was leading Vance to do in our Pastor’s Conference to focus on unreached, unengaged people groups. As you hear David Platt’s sermon tomorrow, the focus is going to be reaching out to unreached, unengaged people groups. As you see the callout that is going to take place with International Mission Board on Wednesday afternoon, I hope that you will be here for that as well as our North American Mission Board this afternoon because you’re going to see a challenge for church planting with our North American Mission Board. You’re going to see a challenge for stepping forth and leading your church to commit, to embrace for whatever it takes, however long it takes to reach unreached and unengaged people groups.

Do you realize, folks, how dramatically different this is going to be? It means that the local church is going to be in the leadership role, not NAMB, not the IMB, but the local church. It means a local church of any size, in any location can step forth in on faith to do this, and the IMB will be there to facilitate the process, or NAMB will be there to facilitate the process of being part of a church plant. The local church will be in the leadership role.

In 1989, the International Mission Board came to Johnson Ferry, and they asked us if we would adopt an unreached people group by the name of the Kyrgyz. And being classically, geographically challenged Americans, we had no idea who they were or where they were. It was a nation in the old Soviet Union, a central Asia nation. It was completely closed. It sounded pretty interesting to us, so we said, “Yeah, we’ll adopt them. What do we do?” And they said, “Well, all you can do now is pray because the door is closed. You can’t go in.”

We began to pray, and we prayed diligently. And two years later, communism fell in the Soviet Union, and the door was open. And we were ready to send in medical mission teams that were also trained to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ as they were caring for patients there. We sent in many of our business men who would teach seminars on free enterprise and what it means to start a business. For all these years, these people had lived in a communist system. They had no idea about how to do that. But all of these business men were trained to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ with those that they were teaching.

And as the door opened, churches began to be formed. And now the church is there among that people group. You know at Johnson Ferry, after that happened and the wall fell, we began to take credit for the fall of communism.

But you know what? As we chuckle about that, we have a mighty big God who is bigger than any distance problem, travel problem, ideological regime problem that doesn’t allow Christians of any kind to have a witness among that people group. We have a God who is far bigger than all that. But it doesn’t matter the size of your church.

This spring, I had the privilege to preach in the church that my grandfather last pastored in his days of full-time ministry at First Baptist Bainbridge. It’s in a very small town in Southwest Georgia. His funeral was there, and it had been 40 years since I had been to that church for my grandfather’s funeral. He died when I was 16 years old. I had no idea—it was before I had made a commitment to Christ, and I had no idea that I was going to become a pastor. And man, I have thought so many times, “If I could just have had an hour with my Granddaddy – just to talk to him about the calling of being a pastor.”

But I went to that church and had the privilege of preaching in that church. And afterwards, the pastor and his family, and Anne and I were visiting together. And I said, “Well, what’s the most exciting thing happening here in your church?” His eyes lit up. He said, “Well, a few

years ago, we sent two of our members on an exploratory trip to West Africa in Mali. And the IMB had been trying to get connected to one of the unreached, unengaged people groups there in Mali. And over the course of the last three or four years, we have sent teams there. And one of our last teams had the opportunity to go in and present the Gospel for the first time to this tribe that had never heard it, and two of those people came to Christ that day.” And I thought to myself, “This pastor has no idea what God has put on my heart, what God has put on Tom’s heart, but the Holy Spirit is clearly moving.”

No matter what size your church is—whether it’s a big church, whether it’s a small church or a medium size church, no matter where your church is located—every church can come forth to make this commitment. And understand, my friends, this is not to be in place of the Cooperative Program. This is not to be in place of Lottie Moon or Annie Armstrong or any of the special offerings we have. This is in addition to. And for a period of time, the only thing God might allow you to do is to pray for those people. There is going to be an openness that God is going to bring because one day, every people group on the face of the earth is going to have the opportunity to hear the Gospel of Christ, and then Jesus will return.

And we have to make a decision. Let us realize our decision. Our decision is to be a part of God’s Kingdom business or to be on the sidelines. And with all the resources that God has blessed Southern Baptists with, the 45,000 churches, there is no reason at all that we cannot have enough churches to step forward and embrace every single one of these unengaged and unreached people groups.

Now, in that light, let’s look and see what Jesus says at the end of verse 5. He says,

Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; (and then He says this) or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place—unless you repent.

Do you realize what Jesus was saying to Ephesus and what He is saying to all of us? Now listen, everybody. Are you listening? God, in His sovereignty, is going to complete the mission of the church. But our choice is this. Are we going to be a part of what God is doing in this world? Are we going to be on the front lines of ministry in the excitement of following God to places where only God could get us to go? Or are we going to be on the sidelines and miss out on what God would like to do in our life? Because He is going to find somebody who is willing. And if we are unwilling as a people, our lampstand will be removed. There’s nothing sacred about the Southern Baptist Convention when the Southern Baptist Convention refuses to follow the will of God.

Listen to what Jesus says as He goes on.

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Listen. Are you listening? Christ has told us that when we leave our first love, we need to remember what it was like when we fell in love with Jesus. We need to repent and get our priorities right. And we need to begin to do what God is leading us to do in fulfilling the mission of the church.

But please hear me, my friends. The starting point is not the Great Commission. The starting point is falling in love with Jesus once again. I don’t know about you, but I hope more than anything that those who know me best—be it Anne or my boys or my grandchildren or our church—it is my hope, most of all, that when my days are done, that what they will remember most of all is —“He sure loved Jesus.”

Let’s pray together.

Father God, it would be so easy for us to come to another Southern Baptist Convention, hear a few sermons, see a few friends, and go home missing out on the main thing You’re trying to tell us of how we have left our first love as individuals, as local churches, as a

Convention. Oh Father, may Your Holy Spirit be a great convictor, at this time, of any way, anything, any person that is coming before Jesus Christ.

And Father, may You give us the courage to remember what it was like to have that fresh joy of a new believer in Christ. May You take us back to where we started both as individuals and as a denomination. Father, may You use our lives—Oh, Lord—give us another chance. May You use our lives as we fall in love with Jesus all over again to start to love lost people again, to start to have a passion to go to the tough places to share the good news of Christ. Oh Lord, may you do a work among us that only you can do as we pray this prayer in Jesus' name. Amen.

—from the office of Bryant Wright