Thank you, combined choirs. I thank the folks from Johnson Ferry for coming this long way to New Orleans and for all the choirs that have joined us today. Let’s show our appreciation to them for leading us in worship.

I want to also take a moment to thank you for the privilege of serving as your president over the last two years. It has been a very, very energizing experience and a very, very exhausting experience. As I talked to Tom Elliff early on about his days of serving as president, he said, “Bryant, it’s a two-year sprint. You’ll have so many amazing experiences in worship and doing things for the Kingdom, but they will be happening so fast you won’t even have time to reflect on them.” And that’s certainly been the case. But also, it has been a time of seeing a broader picture of how God is working through Southern Baptist Christians to build up the Kingdom of Christ, and that has been a real privilege. So, I thank you for this privilege to serve. It has been my prayer that the Kingdom of Christ truly has been built up during these two years together.

I want to ask you to turn in your Bibles to Luke 24, as we look at Luke’s account of what is really Christ’s Great Commission to His disciples. We’re going to be reading verses 44 through 49. Recognizing these are not just the words of a man but the Word of God, let’s all stand for the reading of God’s Word at this time.

Luke 24, beginning in verse 44: “Now Jesus said to them, ‘These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.’ Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and He said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses to these things. And behold, I am sending forth the promise of My Father upon you; but you are to stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.’”

Father God, as your Word is opened in this time of worship, it is my prayer that you will speak to all of us where we live and that we will receive your Word in faith, that we will apply your Word to our everyday lives. And Father, may we see Jesus Christ, The Word, in the study of your perfectly true written Word. Lord, by the power of your Holy Spirit may we be convicted, may we be taught, may we be coached in what it means to be a follower of Jesus. We pray this prayer in Jesus’ name. Amen.

When I began as the first pastor of Johnson Ferry a little over 30 years ago, we were meeting in an empty, unleashed doctor’s office, and it was really a different day in church. For one thing, church planting was not cool. On the seminary campuses, the ideal was to go to an established church, a prominent church. That was what you heard students talking about day in and day out. How different it is today! Traditional worship was the only game in town. It was hard to find contemporary worship in those days.

It was also the time when the intensity of the conflict within our denomination over the inerrancy of the Word of God was taking place. Thankfully, Southern Baptist Christians led this Convention, led this denomination to do something no other denomination had ever done before – to return to biblical orthodoxy when there had been a wayward turn to the left. And for that we are still thankful and must be ever vigilant.
But what is often overlooked and what is really largely forgotten is that in those days almost 30 years ago, there was another pretty intense conflict within the churches in our Convention. It had to do with the charismatic movement or the Pentecostal movement or the interpretation, or actually application, of spiritual gifts. And even though you hardly ever hear it talked about today, it was an incredibly intense conflict within a lot of churches of that day. There were those who felt that the miraculous gifts ceased in the Apostolic Age. There were others who felt that all the spiritual gifts, including the miraculous gifts, still applied to the church today but with an important consideration and understanding of the teaching of 1 Corinthians 12 and 1 Corinthians 14 in how to implement the use of all gifts within the church. But it’s also interesting to note that even though there were two different views, both biblically-based, over time that conflict simply seemed to die away.

Later on, the worship wars began to occur – the concern over traditional and contemporary worship. And it’s very interesting that this conflict is still a very real issue in many churches today. It is also very interesting that both groups who are interested in differing styles of worship come to this from a biblical basis of how they can best worship God. And what often happens in many churches is the idea we will have blended worship. And what blended worship tends to do is just absolutely grate on the nerves of traditional worshipers while having contemporary worshipers say to themselves, “That’s pitiful!” The fact is, all kinds of different styles are very appropriate as long as they are Christ-centered and biblically-based. At Johnson Ferry, we offer both traditional and contemporary worship styles. And here in this convention, we’ll have traditional worship today and contemporary worship tomorrow. It’s important to understand that even though there are differences in styles of worship, it would be hard to find any church plant within our Convention that is not engaged in some form of contemporary worship. So we want to understand that even though we respect differing styles of worship as long as they are Christ-centered and biblically-based, they can all glorify God.

But today the great tension has arisen concerning Calvinism, or Reformed Theology. When I began to study this text in Luke 24 several months ago, the Holy Spirit convicted me that this elephant in the room needed to be addressed. Little did I know that everyone would be talking about the elephant by the time the convention came around, but it does need to be addressed.

Calvinism, or Reformed Theology, is hot. It is especially hot with college students, with seminary students, and with young pastors within our Convention. And there is no doubt that there are going to be differences in Calvinist theology and traditional Southern Baptist theology when it comes to the issues of election and salvation. And there is also no doubt that these differences have existed off and on with varying degrees in regards to the tension within the church over these issues for really almost 2,000 years – not with these names – but with these differences over theology when it comes to election and when it comes to salvation.

Now, here is my concern. Everybody, are you listening? My concern is that we can have Christ-centered, Bible-believing Christians so engaged in trying to correct one another’s views when it comes to election, that the next thing you know, the devil is standing over to the side because we have taken our focus off what Christ tells us our clear mission is, and that is the Great Commission. And he is going to be laughing and he is going to be mocking and he is going to be rejoicing that we’re no longer interested in rescuing the captives that God calls us to rescue with the gospel of Jesus Christ. And my friends, for the churches of this Convention, that would be a tragedy. Let us understand that these two views on election and salvation can coexist as long as we stay Christ-centered and biblically-based in our theology. So a word to these two groups. To our Calvinist friends, a bit of humility would be most welcome. Any time there is pride, whether it is spiritual pride or intellectual pride or theological pride, it is always a sin. And we need to recognize that an attitude of superiority with those who may disagree on the finer aspects of theological beliefs is never going to build up the church of Jesus Christ. A little humility would be appreciated.
in not thinking that because there are some very gifted theologians at the beginning of the 21st century, what has been an unresolved mystery of the faith – reconciling the sovereignty of God and the free will of man – is going to be resolved in the early days of the 21st century. That is literally comical in its conceit.

To those who call themselves traditional Southern Baptists, the time for judgmentalism is over because judgmentalism quickly moves into slander. To lump all those who have a strong, solid, biblically-based theology that is a more Calvinist reformed theology with being hyper-Calvinists – which is a theological error for sure – is not only misguided, but winds up causing you to break the 9th commandment on false witness. It is time to show some respect for those of differing views when it comes to election and when it comes to salvation.

In 2006 at the Pastors’ Conference in Greensboro, Dr. Paige Patterson and Dr. Al Mohler were asked to come into some of our break-out sessions – two men who represent differing views when it comes to election and salvation coming together to show they could agree to disagree, to show that these men who are greatly respected, godly men of great theological minds, could show love and respect for one another while all the while seeking to stay Christ-centered and focused on Christ’s Great Commission. It was the hope at that time that the spirit they modeled could be the spirit found throughout our Convention. That is the spirit we need today. And I call on all Southern Baptist Christians to be sure that you are centered in what Christ is talking about in this text and not prideful about a certain school of theological belief when it comes to election.

Look at what Jesus says in verses 44 and 45. He says, “‘These words which I spoke to you while I was still with you that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.’ Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures.”

Now, let us never forget that whether you are studying the Old Covenant or whether you’re studying the New Covenant, the central focus is Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Messiah, the Savior, our Lord. And if we pride ourselves on being a traditional Southern Baptist or on being a Calvinist or a reformed theologian more than we are thankful that we are Christ-centered and biblically-based and known by our fellow man that way, then it is time to repent of our theological idolatry. Our calling is to be centered on Christ and grounded in the Word, while agreeing to disagree on the finer points of theological issues. May we all agree that Christ is central to the Old Covenant and the New Covenant and that Christ has given us a very clear message and mission for the church.

This is not the only time that Jesus after His resurrection opened the minds of His disciples. When He was on the road to Emmaus earlier, there were two men who didn’t realize He was Jesus in His resurrected body. He very clearly showed them how He is central to the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. He is the fulfillment of all Scripture. Jesus Christ, the Word of God, is the central focus of the perfectly true written Word of God, and we want to open the minds of those who are entrusted to us with Christ-centered, biblically-based teaching so we communicate, most of all, that we are Christ-centered, biblically-based Christians. And if your reputation is something else, it’s time to ask God to help you change your reputation.

It’s very interesting, in verse 45, that the Word of God tells us that “He opened the minds of the disciples to understand.” Those of you who are preachers, those of you who are teachers, can there be anything that brings greater joy to your heart at the end of a worship service than for somebody to come to you at the door and say, “Pastor, I’ve never heard that before, I’ve never thought of that before, but I see where the Word of God is true on this issue. Pastor, I’ve read that passage so many times, and I’ve never really understood that about Jesus before.” Compare this to the person who comes up after the service and says, “Good sermon, pastor,” which means they’ve decided to endure one more Sunday, and nothing has changed in their lives. But Jesus opened the minds of those disciples to help them to see He is central to Scripture. And that is to be our central focus, as well, and that is how we need to be known as Southern Baptist Christians.
But that’s not all. Jesus very clearly gives us the message of the church in verse 46. “He said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead on the third day, and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name.’” Now, this is the gospel. What is the gospel? The gospel is that Christ died for our sins and Christ rose from the dead. Look at 1 Corinthians 15:3 and 4. The gospel is clear. Christ died for our sins and Christ rose from the dead. Central to our message is communicating to the world this incredibly good news that follows devastatingly bad news. A lot of times we talk about the gospel as being good news, which it is. But it is truer to say that the gospel is good news that follows terribly bad news. And that terribly bad news is that sinful men have murdered the Son of God with their sins. Those sinful men are you and me, and we’re deserving of the judgment of God in our rejection of the Son of God. But the good news that follows this bad news is that God in His sovereignty sent His Son to be the Savior for our sins, to pay the penalty for our sins, to die a substitutionary death in atonement for our sins. And when we communicate that God has done this – dying in our place, paying the penalty that we deserve and at the same time offering us forgiveness for all of our sins, past, present and future – this is incredibly good news.

When we were on a mission trip to Southeast Asia with a few pastors and some of our IMB personnel a few weeks ago, we were seeking to visit with some of the tribes in the jungle area. And while visiting one of those tribes, we met our host, who began to take us through his village, a village where they had never heard of Jesus Christ. And as he was taking us through the village, telling us all about the spirit world (they’re very animistic in this particular culture, and he was telling us all about the spirit world and all the concerns about the spirit world), we came to a pole in the middle of this very poor, dirt poor village. I asked him, “What is that pole for?” He said, “That’s a sacrificing pole.” I said, “What’s the sacrificing pole for?” He said, “Once a year we sacrifice a bull in the time of the rice harvest and hope we have a good crop to appease the spirits. And when we feel like things are going bad, we’ll sacrifice chickens during the year in order to appease the spirits.” I looked at him and said, “I have some good news for you. Have you ever heard of Jesus?” He looked at me with wide eyes and said, “No.” Our IMB missionary asked him, “Have you ever heard of Christians?” He said, “I’ve heard of that term ‘Christian’, but I don’t know this Jesus.” We began to tell him that God loved him so much that He had sent His only Son to be the ultimate and final sacrifice to die on a pole in the shape of a cross to where there would never be a need for sacrifices again because Christ had paid the penalty for all of our sins. And do you know what he said? He said, “No more sacrifices?” We shared with him as we were sitting at that breakfast table, opening the Word of God to him. As he was soaking up the Word of God, there was no doubt he understood and that we were meeting another child of God through faith in Jesus Christ. Folks, that is the heart and core of the gospel, the sacrificing post of the cross, Christ dying for our sins. And what joy it is that when we present this incredibly good news in a world of so much bad news, lives are still transformed.

But that’s not all. In our denominational heritage we are very strong on preaching the cross often to the neglect of the second part of the gospel, which is equally important. And if we don’t have the second part of the gospel, the first part of the gospel of Christ’s dying on a cross is totally irrelevant. We so often confine the second part of the gospel of Christ’s resurrection from the dead to one Sunday a year on Easter. My friends, equal time is called for when it comes to the empty
tomb and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. For without the resurrection, all this preaching of the cross makes no sense at all. It has no power at all. And we will never find victory over sin. And we will never find victory over death. And we will never see loved ones again who have died in Christ. But because the tomb is empty, and because Christ has risen from the dead, there is the sense of victory that we claim. The preaching of the gospel is the message of the church. May we never get away from the preaching of the gospel.

But let’s also look at verse 47. It says that the gospel calls for a sense of repentance, “that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name.” Let us never forget that in presenting the gospel and proclaiming the gospel to all mankind there is always a call for repentant faith. Let us always remember what repentance is. It is a change of mind that leads to a change of direction. And that change of a direction is to follow Jesus, is to trust Jesus, is to be willing to do whatever Christ wants us to do with our lives, and to be willing to go wherever Christ wants us to go with our lives. It always calls for a decision of repentant faith.

With the message of the church, we also very clearly see the mission of the church. Verse 47: “That repentance for the forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.” This is Luke’s version of Christ’s Great Commission being presented to the disciples. Here at the end of the Gospel of Luke, which deals with the body of Christ Number 1, Jesus, we see these transitional verses that lead to Luke’s sequel that deals with the Body of Christ Number 2, the church in Acts of the Apostles. In seeing this, we recognize that our mission is very clear. We are to proclaim the good news to every people group on the face of the earth.

Now in that light, I cannot share with you how excited I am about how the Holy Spirit is moving within so many of our churches and so many of our entities in this regard – first of all, in reaching our neighborhoods. The theme of this convention, the theme of this message is really “Jesus: to the Neighborhood and the Nations.” And understanding that, it is tremendously exciting to see how many are passionate about planting new churches in areas of the United States where there is little or no witness for Jesus Christ.

That is tremendously exciting. It is tremendously exciting because what is happening on our seminary campuses is this passion about church planting. As I shared earlier, when I went through seminary it was a day when people idolized those spots in an established church where there might be prestige. But when you go to the seminary campuses today and you think about our 16,000 seminary students, there is a passion for going to places where a church does not exist – for planting new churches. That is incredibly encouraging to see. And when the North American Mission Board make its presentation tomorrow afternoon and we think about the spirit of planting churches within our land, it really does bode well for the future.

Now, everybody, are you listening? Please, are you listening? I realize there is a great concern about the statistical decline in membership and often in baptisms within our denomination, as there very well should be. But I think there are two major reasons we’re dealing with. Number one is the incredible amount of idolatry in our churches, where the church is really reflecting the culture more than it is impacting and changing culture. The idolatry of materialism is so dominant within so many of our churches that very often the majority of our members don’t manage their money any differently from those who are not followers of Christ. The idolatry of hedonism and pleasure and entertainment are so dominant within the lives of our churches that many live lives that are no different from than those outside the body of Christ. There is the idolatry of technology, the idolatry of social networking, the idolatry of theology, the idolatry of denominationalism. There is even the idolatry of good things like family and spouse. But Christ is very clear. He is to be our Lord, and there are to be no idols in our lives at all. Obviously, this calls for great repentance within our churches.
Secondly, a sociological shift has occurred in American life in the 20th century and the first part of the 21st century. We have moved and are moving from a rural to an urban culture. Two-thirds of our churches are rural or small town with members of a hundred or less and overwhelmingly elderly. Because of this sociological shift and because so much of our focus has been in the rural areas for so much of our history, it would not surprise me at all if this statistical decline continues for several years. But recognizing the spirit within our seminary campuses – the spirit of planting churches in tough areas where people need to be reached – there’s no doubt in my mind that these statistics are going to be reversed in the days to come. And that gives us great hope for the future.

But we also know that we don’t just focus on reaching people for Christ in our Jerusalem. We are to go to the uttermost parts. And that means being concerned especially for those who are unreached and unengaged with the gospel. Last year, the International Mission Board brought a challenge to the convention in Phoenix. That challenge was for churches to step up to the plate, to take the gospel, to engage all 3,800 unreached and unengaged people groups of the world. At that time, over 600 of our churches came forward to respond. Since that time, the number has grown to over 1,300 churches, with all of our seminaries and many of our Baptist colleges committed to embrace at least one unreached and unengaged people group. This is tremendously exciting.

Everybody, are you listening? Jesus could not be clearer in Matthew 24:14 that the gospel of the Kingdom is to be preached to the whole world to every people group on the face of the earth. Then the end will come. Do you realize how exciting it is to realize that you and I have the opportunity to be a part of the final generation of the church in taking the gospel to unreached and unengaged people groups who have never had a chance to respond? When we were in Southeast Asia working with our missionaries there, on the very first day our affinity leader was talking about how exciting it must have been for the early church when they were in that first generation and God was doing such an incredible work, and everywhere they went it was the first time for people to hear the good news of Jesus Christ. But he went on to say, “We don’t have that opportunity. But wouldn’t it be incredible if you and I had the privilege of being a part of the final generation to complete the mission of the church, of taking the gospel to every people group on the face of the earth to where every unreached and unengaged people group can be engaged with the gospel?”

My friends, as the International Mission Board brings their challenge this afternoon, you do not want to miss that time. You do not want to miss what God is doing within our churches today with the assistance of the International Mission Board as we join in the Kingdom enterprise with all kinds of other denominations and parachurch groups who have the same goal of taking the gospel of Christ to every people group on the face of the earth. You don’t want to miss it.

But understand this. When you get on the front lines of taking the gospel where it’s never been, there is going to be intense spiritual warfare like perhaps you have never experienced in your life. On our trip to Southeast Asia, we were hiking through the jungle for six to eight miles to a tribe that had never heard the name of Jesus but had been scouted out by our missionaries in that area. My son George, who introduced me today, became severely dehydrated. As we were trying our best to get some water into him, as his body was trembling, as his extremities were going dead on him, there was no doubt in our minds what was occurring. Yes, it was a physiological problem, but most of all it was spiritual warfare. But I want you to know that my son would say, and I agree with him, that never is the Christian more alive than when we are on the front lines of engaging in spiritual warfare and taking the gospel to people who have never heard it before. There is nothing that makes you feel more alive than being in that place.

Our first group from Johnson Ferry that went to engage an unreached and unengaged people group in northern India was traveling in those rural areas in a van, and they came over the crest of a hill and hit a cow and killed it. Well, you know in that part of world when they think you’ve killed Uncle Willie, they get upset. All of a sudden the village people surrounded the van. They were
shaking the van. They were trying to turn the van over. And every one of our guys on that trip seeking to take the gospel to an unreached, unengaged people group said the intensity of spiritual warfare was greater than they had ever experienced in their lives, but nothing was a greater privi-
lege. So I challenge you, my friends. Christ is very clear about his Great Commission. Will you be willing to lead your church to be on the front lines of taking the gospel to those people groups who have never heard, who are not engaged with the gospel?

But there is one other verse. It must not be overlooked. In verse 49 Jesus says, “Behold I am sending forth the promise of my Father upon you; but you are to stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.” There is nothing more worthless, there is nothing more futile than seeking to do the work of Christ’s church in the flesh. Jesus Christ told his disciples to go and wait on the coming of the Holy Spirit. Jesus was very clear with His disciples in their time of being together in those three years that it was better for Him to leave them so God could send the Holy Spirit to them. Can you imagine that? Can you imagine what the disciples thought when Jesus said, “It’s really better than I leave you so God will send you something even greater.” Can you imagine?

There’s no doubt that the Holy Spirit is perhaps the most neglected person of our Triune God within our tradition, but there is nothing of eternal significance that occurs when we do the act of ministry in the flesh. We are to be Spirit-filled and Spirit-led. And in the process of presenting the gospel in the fulfillment of our mission, it is the Holy Spirit that convicts people of their sin. Man-induced guilt will never do it. It is the Holy Spirit that points people to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. It is the Holy Spirit that gives us that conviction and that desire to obey the Word of God. It is the Holy Spirit that gives us the fruit of Jesus Christ – the spirit of Christ beginning to shape and sanctify our character. It is the Holy Spirit that gives us spiritual gifts that build up the church in order for the church to fulfill the mission that God has given us.

If we’re going to seek to share the gospel with every people group on the face of the earth, we are to be filled and empowered with the Holy Spirit. So my friends, I ask you today, “Are you willing to be known most of all as a Christ-centered, Bible-believing Christian? Are you clear once again that the message of the church is clearly the gospel? Are you clear what Christ is saying about the mission of the church and taking the gospel and proclaiming the gospel to every people group on the face of the earth?”

May we join together as we join with other Great Commission Christians all around the world, and just maybe we will have the privilege of being a part of the final generation in completing the work of the church. And then Christ will come for his church and will allow us to return with Him. And then at last in this troubled world, where things are not as they’re supposed to be – at last on this earth will be the Kingdom of God, where His will is done perfectly on earth as it is already done perfectly in heaven. What a glorious, glorious day!

Let’s pray together. Father God, we thank you and your Word for reminding us that you call on us to be Christ-centered, Bible-believing Christians, and that you give us a very clear message, and you give us a very clear mission. Father, it’s my prayer now that by the power of your Holy Spirit, you will convict us, you will compel us, you will work powerfully in our lives to stay focused on the gospel, to stay committed to your mission. And, Father, it’s my prayer that we’ll be willing to do whatever it takes, that we’ll be willing to pay any sacrifice you call us to make to be on the front lines of spiritual warfare. Father, we’ll be willing to face hardship and persecution. Father, may all of us be willing to give our lives. And if it means martyrdom, may we be willing to do so because we believe in Jesus and because the passion of our lives is to follow Jesus and preach the message of Jesus and fulfill the mission of Jesus. Lord, may you do a great work in our lives and in the churches of this Convention, for it’s in Christ’s name we pray. Amen.

—from the office of Bryant Wright