

SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONVENTION
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The Church Fulfilling Her Mission In World Crisis

INTRODUCTION

A little while ago I stood by the grave of Luther Rice, buried in the cemetery of Pine Pleasant Church, about halfway between Newberry and Saluda, South Carolina. In 1812, he and the Adoniram Judsons had sailed from their native shores to to as Congregational missionaries to India. Searching the scriptures while voyaging toward their destination, Judson and Rice found new insights in the Word of God. Whereupon, they became Baptists in faith and Baptist foreign missionaries in India without the support of Baptists in the homeland. God brought Luther Rice back to America where he could present the challenge of Kingdom outreach to the Baptist churches up and down this land. And so in 1914, these autonomous, independent, commissioned churches rose unitedly to answer the call of the Gospel beyond their borders.

1. From the State of Baptist Beginnings

As a native South Carolinian, I must recall with justifiable pride and gratitude that major thrusts in Baptist life on this continent were launched from my beloved state which has militantly progressed in Baptist work across these fifteen decades. South Carolina gave to the Triennial Convention, organized in 1914 in Philadelphia, the first president--Richard Furman. The first Baptist state convention in America was organized in South Carolina in December, 1821. Close to her borders in Augusta, Georgia, the Southern Baptist Convention was organized in 1845 with 293 registered messengers. To this newly-formed convention, South Carolina once again gave a first president--William Bullein Johnson.

2. The Third Jubilee Observance of Organized Baptist Work

Observing a hundred and fifty years of trial and triumph of preaching and persecution in the Name of Christ, Baptists gathered here for this Third Jubilee Celebration are constrained to say in one great chorus of praise: To God be the glory, great things He hath done!

Seven of the thirty-three Baptist bodies which propagate the Gospel of our Lord on the American continent have joined in a five-year Baptist Jubilee Advance to culminate with this sesquicentennial celebration here in Atlantic City. More than twenty million Baptists are numbered in these groups, of which 10,395,940 are Southern Baptists, members of 33,126 churches, united in extending our outreach with the Gospel to fifty-one countries beyond our native land. Reviewing this glorious past, each of us would declare with the Psalmist, "The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places: yea, I have a goodly heritage." Psalms 16;6.

Baptists claim their lineage as New Testament Christians emerging in every century in groups whose conformity to the principles of Jesus Christ defied the impediments of religious tradition and the restrictions of earthly potentates. Baptists have been unique across the centuries (1) in their stand for the priesthood of the believer, (2) in their belief and insistence upon a regenerate church membership and believer's baptism, (3) in their vigilant fight for religious liberty, (4) in their assiduous stance for separation of church and state, and (5) in their recognition of the church as an autonomous body established by our Lord, divinely commissioned to propagate His Gospel. Refusal to compromise these vital foundations of the faith has cost our Baptist fathers the bitterest forms of persecution and martyrdom. The Methodist historian, Frank Mead, says of Baptists, "We can trace their history more readily in the bloody footprints of their martyrs than in the ink of their historians."

Holding primacy in the advance of Kingdom enterprise across these nineteen hundred years has been the church by divine prerogative and by irrevocable mandate from her Lord. We Baptists, therefore, return to the CHURCH to restudy her charter and her MISSION, to re-examine the milieu of WORLD CRISIS in which she must stand, and to renew our commitment to the church and her Christ for Kingdom triumph in our day!

I. THE CHURCH COMMISSIONED

"But whom say ye that I am?" Jesus asked of his disciples as he painstakingly readied them for His work. "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God," declared Simon Peter. To Peter's reply Jesus said, "...upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." (Matt. 16:18) On the basis of that divinely transformed type of character which is the outgrowth of faith in the deity and Messiahship of Jesus expressed in Peter's confession, it was the purpose of Christ to build a new congregation, distinct from the old congregation of Israel.

To his followers and to all who should follow in the line of Christian heralds, Jesus gave unconditional assurance that hell itself should not prevail against His Church! His love for the church is tersely described by Paul: "Christ loved the church and gave Himself for it." (Eph. 5:25) A charter, sealed by the blood of the Son of God!

1. The Church is Commissioned

The work of atonement was finished; his victory over sin, death, hell and the grave was won; his church established. But then, there was the final work--the commission to be given. To his followers, Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you

always, even unto the end of the world." (Matt. 28:18-20) Chartered! Commissioned!
Her primacy in the work of world evangelization is now fixed!

In the words of Dr. W. O. Carver, "The church is the core of God's kingdom as being realized in human history. Local churches are the agencies of that kingdom and of its gospel; thus they are 'colonies' of the kingdom of heaven on earth, located in the midst of the world which is to be won through the gospel."

2. The Primacy of the Church--Scriptural, Historical, Logical

"The only ecclesiastical organization found in the New Testament was that of the local church," according to the late Dr. W. T. Conner. "Only those should be received into church membership who give credible evidence that they have received Christ as Saviour and Lord. That the church should be composed of the regenerate only, the New Testament makes clear...The doctrine of salvation by grace through faith carries with it a democratic organization of the church...Each local church is self-governing and independent in the management of its affairs."

Dr. W. R. White aptly states the position Baptists have maintained as their interpretation of the New Testament concerning the local church: "We hold that each local church is sovereign and autonomous, yet is under the sovereign Lordship of Christ. As to other churches and organizations, the local congregation is self-determining, but as to our Saviour, His Will is final."

From 1639, when the first Baptist church in America was organized by Roger Williams, to 1707, when the first association was formed, each local church carried out the commission of the Lord without the assistance of any denominational organization beyond the local body. Thus, for sixty-eight years, the ministries of the Gospel were carried on under the aegis of the local body.

Now at this point, let us emphasize that our early day Baptist fathers refused organization simply for organization's sake; but in response to perceived need, Baptist churches were willing to function unitedly. Hence, the organization of that first

association in 1707 in Philadelphia, the first missionary general board in 1814 when Luther Rice rallied the support of the churches for the Judsons in Burma, the formation of the first state convention in 1821, then the organizing of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1845. These denominational bodies were based on scriptural principles of cooperation in spiritual matters, strength in unity, and fellowship in the work of the Gospel. They were not discerned as efforts to replace the work of the local church nor to rival the local body. But without relinquishing any authority, these denominational organizations have formed channels through which the cooperative work of our Baptist churches could flow more freely and rapidly.

The primacy of the church is therefore supported scripturally, historically, and logically, in answering the mandate of her Lord: GO YE...INTO ALL NATIONS...MAKE DISCIPLES...BAPTIZE THEM...TEACH THEM.

II. THE CHURCH IN WORLD CRISIS

Like so many of you here tonight, my ministry has been spent in a local church dealing with the real people and real problems. We have been trying to answer for the eternal stewardship of God upon us as New Testament churches, the primary agencies in His world-wide witness. And so we look at the church in her world which is virtually garbed in crisis tonight.

1. Historically, Every Age Has Been One of Crisis

It was Shakespeare who said of his day, "The time is out of joint: O cursed spite, That ever I was born to set it right." At this moment we are conscious that there is strife on every continent; and we exist under the threat of atomic and hydrogen war which we are told could obliterate civilization. But is it not true that the church was born in a day of trial and testing, in a time when the people of God were under the Roman yoke and when the religion of the day had grown cold, formal and empty? The Roman Empire represented power at its ultimate and materialism at its worst. It was