

Convention Sermon, "Christ our Hope",
by Dr. W. Douglas Hudgins on June 4, 1968.

Much will be said in this Convention about the Crusade of the Americas! Hundreds of our churches and hundreds of thousands of our Baptist people will be vitally concerned in the year ahead that this hemisphere shall experience a mighty spiritual awakening and that myriads may be won to a saving experience in Jesus Christ. Giving impetus to this herculean endeavor is the motto we see emblazoned before us and evident in all our planning: "CHRIST THE ONLY HOPE."

In this worship hour, at the opening session of this significant Convention, I covet your prayerful support as we think together on the subject: "CHRIST OUR HOPE." The scriptural text is from 1 Timothy 1:1, "The Lord Jesus Christ . . . our hope."

Many Christians today are thoroughly confused as they survey the world about them. Many of us have come to this Convention frustrated about world events, soberly shocked at events in our own nation, gravely concerned about the future of our country, and apprehensive about what may occur in all the Americas.

In brief fashion we might characterize our moment in history in five ways.

Ours is a moment of bewildering technology. The marvels of nuclear energy; the fantastic achievements in space exploration; the mathematical wizardry of the computer; the shrinking of the earth through jet-age transportation; the speed of modern communication; the miracles of medicine and

surgery, and the accomplishments of our researchers, inventors and production lines overwhelm us with the achievements of our scientism.

We are also in a period of a convulsive sociology. Old ideas are being challenged, new goals are being set. Long cherished concepts of government law, order, and respect for authority are being flouted. The high ideals of liberty and freedom for all have been tainted by the license excised by some, and the right to dissent has turned into the right to destroy. Arson, looting, and even murder plague some of our cities, and there is no unanimity of opinion as to where the blame lies. Thrift, industry, and the willingness to work seem to be forgotten principles and the frantic scramble for material security from the cradle to the grave is about to bankrupt us financially and jeopardize us emotionally.

Further, we live in an increasingly foul atmosphere of paganized ideology. God, public prayer, and the Bible have been barred from the classroom by judicial restraint but the pupil can be taken out of the school and paraded in public demonstrations under police protection. Mammon occupies the throne of worship in the lives of many and some have even conducted their own private funeral services for the Almighty. Moral ideals and standards of purity are being assaulted from all sides. Alcoholism is increasing in frightening proportions and social drinking is losing it disfavor among many of our members. Drug addiction, often having its inception in experiments with marijuana, has victimized far more of our people than the average church member knows. Many of our novels, our stage plays, and our movies reek with moral putridity. Profanity and subtle portrayal of the tawdry and the

bestial are even being beamed into our homes through an occasional televised program. Sexual promiscuity is presented to young people as the "in" way of life and acceptable respectability is even being sought by many for sexual deviate.

We are also in a time of confused theology. Of course, it is impossible to have a Christianity without a theology, but how confused can some of our theologians get? Much of modern theological thought confuses instead of clarifies; debates instead of declares; hesitates instead of heralds; apologizes instead of capitalizes; and undermines instead of undergirds. Honored always should be those who sound no uncertain note about the credibility of God's Word; the sovereignty, majesty, holiness, justice, love and mercy of Jehovah; the deity of Jesus Christ; the reality of regeneration; the necessity of the atonement; the mission of the church; the power of the spirit; and the certainty of life everlasting!

And, who can doubt but that we are in the throes of a changing ecclesiology? Once, we Baptists were a simple, largely rural people, fervently evangelistic and able to demonstrate our spiritual emotions with a hearty "Amen" and an occasional Methodist shout! Now, we are increasingly urban, more affluent, more educated, more cultured, and more sophisticated. Any display of emotionalism incurs many a jaundiced eye and in many of our churches, if a brother were to come out with a fervent "Amen", many would say to themselves "Who let that man in?" Many of us have gone formal and some even ritualistic-- not that there is anything wrong with formalism and ritualism as long as they

occupy their proper places -- and have seemed to lose our fervor and our exhilaration.

In some of our pulpits the impassioned proclamation of the gospel has given way to the pronouncement of our philosophical sophistries. "Thus saith the Lord" in many pulpits has been displaced by "Thus desireth the people." Instead of "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand," many congregations hear "Rejoice, for social utopia is upon us." Activism, humanism, universalism and pure socialism in some areas seem more intent on making man comfortable than Christian. Some in our day appear to be more concerned with changing our social order than in the regeneration of the individual, out of whom an orderly social structure can be built. Some of our people hear more about the "brotherhood of man" in a clamor for ecumenical acceptance than they do about the fact that "If any man be in Christ he is a new creature." And, from what we observe, there are some among us, even in high places, who would make of our Lord's Church but another institution of social betterment in the local community complex instead of a divine institution heralding God's salvation to the repentant and believing of heart.

Ours is an age of bewilderment and we have much reason for our apprehensions and our concerns. Not in many years has the great cross section of our Baptist people struggled to retain their confidence as they exercise their faith as we are witnessing today. We pastors may not be aware of it, but our people are bewildered and baffled, and long for some God-breathed assurance that there is "beauty for ashes" and the oil of joy for mourning" (Isa. 61:3).

Is all dark? Is all despair about us? Am I a spokesman for the prophets of doom? Let one of God's noble preachers speak. A few weeks ago I heard a former president of this Convention, a guest Christian statesman and leader say, "I am not a pessimist! I cannot be because I am a Christian. But, I am not an optimist! Realism prevents it! I am a 'Hope-ist.'"

Hope! Hope as a Christian! Hope as set forth in the Scriptures! Hope-- as expressed by the Apostle Paul in his first letter to Timothy in the opening salutation. "the Lord Jesus Christ, our Hope." As Christ was then, is He not now? G. Campbell Morgan says that "hope comes to its brightest shining in the presence of deepest darkness." Our day may be dark but there IS hope! We do not despair! We are not doomed! We are not defeated! Commenting on our text, William Barclay observes that "In the New Testament the word 'hope' always conveys an element of absolute certainty, a quality genuinely lacking in present-day image." Our hope is an assured reality; our hope is Christ!

Why is our hope built on Christ? May I suggest that He is our hope BECAUSE OF WHAT HE IS.

Much of humanity has given testimony as to who He was. Pilate called him "the man without a fault;" Napoleon called Him the "emperor of love," Strauss called Him the "highest model of religion;" Renan called Him the "greatest among the sons of men;" Parker called Him the "youth with God in His heart;" and Lanier called Him "man's best man!" These, however, do not tell us what He is.

Lord Byron, who, himself, was not a Christian, said, "If ever God was man, and man was God, Jesus is both." Henry Ward Beecher said, "If Christ

be not divine, every impulse of the Christian world falls to a lower octave, and light, and love and hope decline." Blind John Milton saw Christ as "the begotten God, in whose conspicuous countenance, without cloud, made visible, the Almighty Father shines."

Thus, great men have sought to describe the Son of God, but we turn to Jesus' own words as He says, "Before Abraham was, I am" (John 8:58). Or, we hear the beloved John open his Gospel by declaring, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). Immediately we call to mind a similar verse, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1), but we realize that John's avowal antedates the opening verse of the Bible. Before there could be a creation there must of necessity be a Creator, and Christ was the agent in that creative act; "For by Him were all things created" (Col. 1:6)

Not content with the assertion that Christ eternally had co-existed with the Father, John further says, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory of the only begotten of the Father" (John 1:4). Eternally, and actually, then, He has been, still is, and ever will be the divine son of God. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews describes Him as "Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and today, and forever (Heb. 13:8).

At His baptism the Scriptures tell us that "when He was baptized, lo, a voice out of the heavens, saying, this is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17). Our Lord Himself, in the allegory of the Good Shepherd, announced that "I and my Father are one" (John 10:30), and in the upper room

just before His crucifixion He triumphantly assured His disciples that "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father" (John 14:9).

Paul never had any doubt about the deity of the Savior. To the Philippian Church he wrote, "Have this mind in you which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God thought it not robbery to be equal with God" (Phil. 2:5-6), and the author of Hebrews describes our Lord thus: "God . . . hath spoken to us in His Son . . . through whom also He made the worlds; who, being the effulgence of His glory and the very image of His substance . . . when He had made purification for sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become better than the angels" (Heb. 1:1-4).

Christ is our hope, then, because of what He IS. He is God. Not a deity made with our own hands; not one of the world's great religionists; not a dead claimant to the miraculous; not the greatest teacher of all time; not the greatest idealist the world had ever known; but God! God eternal, omnipotent redeeming, reigning, and returning! God! About whom Paul said, "For He must reign, till He hath put all enemies under His feet" (1 Cor. 15:25). How can the Christian have anything but hope when He is what He is?

BECAUSE OF WHAT HE TAUGHT

Jesus was described by the author of the first gospel as one who "taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes" (Matt. 7:29). During His ministry He set forth some completely new ideas and the power of an idea is impossible to compute. Some of our Lord's teachings that give us hope now, as that day, are:

Sin is life's starkest reality and he who does not believe in Him as Savior is already under condemnation. But, "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son, that whosoever believeth on Him should not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16), and Paul rejoices that "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself" (11 Cor. 5:19). Jesus described sin for what it is and stated the principle of regeneration in no uncertain terms when He said to Nicodemus, "Except one be born anew, he cannot see the Kingdom of God" (John 3:3). In Him as God's atoning sacrifice is our assurance of sonship and the certainty of everlasting fellowship with God.

Man, through His redemptive work, has direct access to God. When, in His death upon the cross the veil of the temple was rent asunder, Jesus became every man's access to God and there was no longer the necessity for priestly intervention. Because of Him every man has the hope that he can come to God directly.

Real and lasting happiness in life is based upon righteousness; not upon material possessions and security. The Old Testament had taught "be sure your sin will find you out" (Num. 32:33). Jesus put it positively when He said, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and all these things shall be added unto you" (Matt. 6:33).

That true greatness is measured in service. In setting forth qualities for the superior kind of life Jesus said, "Whosoever would become great among you shall be your servant" (Matt. 20:26). The world's standard of success and supremacy leaves most of us wanting; but any Christian possesses the

ability for greatness in selfless service, in Christ's name, no matter what his place or position.

That God associates the Christian with Him in the task of redeeming humankind and extending the Kingdom of God upon this earth. One of the marvels of the so-called Great Commission is that our Lord assumed that we would be partners with Him in the spread of the Gospel. These are but a few of the things He taught and because of them we possess hope now and for the future.

BECAUSE OF WHAT HE DID

Great as is our hope in Christ because of what He is and what He taught, it is what He DID that gives us our sense of assurance. First of all, He revealed to man what God was like. For centuries the Jews had witnessed to the world of the unique supremacy of the One Jehovah, but it remained for Jesus to reveal Him as the Redeeming Father. Job of old cried, "Canst thou be searching find out God?" (Job 11:7), but "When the fullness of time came, God sent forth His Son . . ." (Gal. 4:4), and "The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten of the Father" (John 1:14). In testifying of the hope of the incarnation, John says, "No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him" (John 1:18). Jesus, Himself, gave assurance to this truth when He said, "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father" (John 14:9). Yes, through Him the world can know God.

Second, He shared our nature and was subject to every temptation known

to human flesh, yet He was able not to sin. Thus, He achieved what no other man has ever accomplished: life utterly without taint or stain of sin. In portraying the Savior as our great high priest the author of Hebrews rejoices that "Having a great high priest, who hath passed through the heavens, Jesus, the son of God, let us hold fast our confession, for we have not an high priest that cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities, but one that hath been, in all points, tempted like as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:14-15). O, the hope that is ours that there is a Savior that could live completely victorious over sin! In Him, and in Him alone, has sin been vanquished!

Third, greatest hope of all; O, shout it with rejoicing He accomplished our salvation! Peter preached, "In Him is salvation, and in no other" (Acts 4:12), and Paul exults, "God was, in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself for Him, who knew no sin, hath God made to be sin on our behalf, that we may become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor. 5:19-21); and Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3). Tragedy of tragedies; mystery of mysteries, glory of glories . . . the atonement of our blessed Lord on Gologtha's despised cross gives hope to a sinbattered world that there is forgiveness for sin and adoption into the family of God!

Fourth, as God's validation of His atoning achievement and as a divine guarantee of its accomplishment, Jesus rose from the dead! Had there been no resurrection the world would have looked upon the crucifixion experience as a failure and would have been remembering only as a dead martyr. But, as an open triumph over sin and death, we join with Paul when he says, "But now is

Christ risen from the dead and become the first-fruits of them that slept"

(1 Cor. 15:20).

BECAUSE OF WHAT HE PROMISES

The nature, the teachings, and the accomplishments of Jesus are bulwarks of hope to all men who will receive Him into their hearts; and God's redeeming grace, that affords salvation to all who will believe, causes to sing:

"I know not why God's wondrous grace
To me He hath made known,
Nor why, unworthy, Christ in love
Redeemed me for His own.

I know not how this saving faith
To me He did impart;
Nor how believing in His Word
Wrought peace within my heart.

But, I know whom I have believed,
And am persuaded that He is able
To keep that which I've committed
Unto Him against that day."

McGranahan

But there is more to the Christian's hope!

Like God's rainbow of hope against the dark clouds of Old Testament doom and dismay, our Lord's promises quiet our fears, allay our apprehensions give us courage, and assure us that there is a triumphant victory to be enjoyed when God shall bring to a consummation His plan for the ages! To the believer there is promised eternal life. "He that believeth on the Son hath eternal life" (John 3:36), was His assurance to every man who would trust Him; and to the man who would acknowledge Him as the Good Shepherd He said, "I give unto them eternal life and they shall never perish" (John 10:28).

To the little band of followers who were to be the nucleus of His Church Jesus promised: "And I will build my Church, and the gates of hades shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18); and to an enlarged assemblage of the faithful He said, "And, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world" (Matt. 28:20). As continuing dynamic of His resurrection victory He sent the Holy Spirit upon the Church at Pentecost fulfilling His promise, "And ye shall be endued with power from on high" (Luke 24:49).

To every Christian His promises relative to death and the life beyond defy description and are precious beyond compare. That we all face death is indisputable. Some of us may have a long, agonizing stewardship of suffering and helplessness before the Lord delivers us. Some of us may be taken away in an accident or sudden collapse. Even among us here at this Convention some may not return home. But, do we fear death? Do we live in constant apprehension that life's end looms menacingly in the background of every heart beat? Not the Christian! Not you and I! None of us, it may be, is anxious to see the wick of life's candle snuffed out tonight, but we do not cringe in fear lest, when the flame dies out, we will be in total darkness! Why? Why do we not fear?

Because our hope is in the promises of the Lord Jesus Christ! When He faced death with two of His friends here on earth and even wept with them in their sorrow He said, "I am the resurrection and the life; he that believeth on me, though he die, yet shall he live" (John 11:25). As the disciples were

preparing to leave the upper room prior to the crucifixion He said, "Because I live, ye shall live also! (John 14:19). Death, then, is something not to be feared by the Christian; Jesus has taken the sting from it. It becomes a God-opened door through which we move from the limits of time and space into the eternity of companionship with the redeemed hosts in the service of God.

Another of our Lord's promises has to do with the natural inclination of man to have some assurance about the future. Familiar to us all, and known and loved by countless throngs, is the simple but sure promise of Jesus contained in the 14th chapter of John. "In my Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also" (John 14:2-3). He does not describe it; He goes into little detail about it; He simply says it exists--and, "I am making ready a place for you!" John describes heaven in the Revelation in terms of exquisite splendor, using all the treasures of speech available to portray its magnificance. Heaven, wherever it may be in God's limitless universe, it promised to us forever and in it will be the fellowship of our Savior.

There is yet another assurance that inheres in Christ. It is a promise demonstrated rather than spoken. It is something achieved rather than announced.

That is the hope of the resurrection of the body. The resurrection of the body, not the spirit only. As the hope of the early Church grew and

and developed it remained, in the providence of God, for the Apostle Paul to catch the triumph inherent in our Savior's resurrection. In the incomparable 15th chapter of 1 Corinthians he gives the greatest treatise ever written on the resurrection and the life beyond. Listen to him as he says, "For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received; that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures; that He was buried; and that He hath been raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3-4). Of the fact of Christ's resurrection Paul has no doubt. To him it was the guarantee of God's atoning grace in Christ. The resurrection is a fact. But, the resurrection of what? The soul of the believer? If the soul is to be resurrected it must be deduced that the soul has died. That cannot be so, for the soul is immortal. The soul never dies. It was the body of the Savior that was resurrected. He appeared during those forty days in a body. A body changed and transformed, yes--but a body, nonetheless.

But hear Paul further: "But now hath Christ been raised from the dead the firstfruits of them that are asleep" (1 Cor. 15:20). To be resurrected implies a death. Since the soul is immortal it had to be the body, and the miracle of the resurrection of Christ in His body is a promise of the same deliverance for us. How do we know? He became the "firstfruits" of them that are asleep. What does he mean? In the Septuagint the expression described the firstfruits of the harvest, an evidence of that which was to come in its fullness. Herschel Hobbs (Epistle to the Corinthians, Page 71) says that in the papyri the same expression was used to denote "earnest money," "legacy duty," or an "entrance fee." Christ, raised from the dead

is the "earnest money" guaranteeing a general resurrection in time to come. And, significantly (see Hobbs), "them that slept" literally means those bodies lying in a cemetery!

Hope? Assurance for the future? Confidence in God's provision for the world beyond this? Ah, not only do we have hope that we can be saved from our sins through Christ's atoning death; and not only do we have hope that we can live the Christian life through the power of Jesus as Lord; we have the assured hope that we "shall ever be with the Lord" (1 Thess. 4:17).

I go back to the words of a former president of this Convention: "I am a hope-ist!"

Are not we all? And is not that hope an assurance centered in the Lord Jesus Christ? As Paul wrote to Timothy, let us remember that "The Lord Jesus Christ (is) our Hope."