

# Annual Convention Sermon

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## OUR AUTONOMY AND CHRIST'S AUTHORITY

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By Scott L. Tatum

*Scripture:* Matthew 16:13-24, 28:18-20; Colossians 1:14-18.

*Introduction:* Several months ago our church purchased a tract of land in a rapidly developing area of our city for the purpose of starting a new work for our Lord. A short time after the purchase someone asked me, "Pastor, do we plan to build a new church there, or only a mission?" That question started me to thinking. What is the difference between a church and a mission? What is the difference between the Southern Baptist Convention and the newest, smallest mission convention on some foreign field?

Usually when we speak of an autonomous church or convention, we refer to it as independent, self-governing, and self-supporting. By way of contrast we speak of a mission as a dependent ministry—neither self-supporting nor self-governing.

Throughout our history Baptists have stressed the importance of the autonomy of our churches, the autonomy of our associations, and the autonomy of our conventions. Article IV of the Southern Baptist Convention Constitution speaks of its authority: "While independent and sovereign in its own sphere, the Convention does not claim and never will attempt to exercise any authority over any other Baptist body . . ." The Louisiana Baptist Convention constitution declares even more boldly: "This Convention is an independent and sovereign Baptist group and shall achieve its objectives through such means as the Convention alone determines."

Let it be said in defense of both of these constitutions that the purpose set forth is the furtherance of the kingdom of God. If this is true ought not Christ to be king? But is Christ sovereign in my denomination? Is He the head of my church? Is He the Lord of my life?

I love my church and I love my denomination, and this leads me to attempt to guide our worship in the direction of thinking a little less of our autonomy and a little more of the sovereignty of Christ.

### I. THE AUTHORITY OF JESUS CHRIST SUPERSEDES THE AUTONOMY OF MY CHURCH

The dictionary defines autonomy as the right of self-government, the power of self-determination without outside control, independent existence.

But Jesus said, "Upon this rock I will build MY church" (Matthew 16:18) "All authority has been given unto ME." (Matthew 28:18).

Paul declared: "Christ is the head of the body, the church: . . . that in all things He might have the pre-eminence." (Colossians 1:18) In my church then, we ought not to be so interested in seeking the will of the majority of the members as in leading the members to discover the will of the sovereign Christ.

Somewhere out in Texas a crude fellow was fortunate enough to have oil discovered beneath his farm. In his new found riches there was a streak of generosity and he built a new church house for the community. Some time later there was a religious survey, and the folks who visited him did not know him. They asked, "Do you belong to the church?" He bristled and answered, "Hell no! I don't belong to the church. The church belongs to me."

Jesus said, "I am the vine, you are the branches." (John 15:5) Just as surely as the branch is dependent on the vine; so are we dependent on Christ for our very existence. As the body can neither function nor live without the head, neither can the church function or live without Christ. If my church is not really independent and self-governing, how can my denomination be?

### II. THE AUTHORITY OF JESUS CHRIST GIVES PRIORITY TO WORLD EVANGELISM

Surely all of us can agree that the one thing uppermost in the mind of our Lord in giving his commissions to his disciples was the winning of individual persons to faith in Jesus Christ as Savior. Our primary assignment is to rescue souls from the hell of the here and now and the hell of the hereafter.

One attractive feature of Communism is its design for world conquest. One weakness of modern Christianity is its lack of design for world conquest. Churches that emphasize numbers sometime forget people, but churches that are not interested in numbers are often not interested in the souls of people either. I believe it is time for a renewal of interest in numbers that really do represent people.

Jesus said, "The gates of Hell shall not prevail against my church." This reference, of course, is not to the defensive protection assured the church, but the promise of victory as the church moves out offensively. We are literally to storm the gates of hell to rescue sinners. The primary task of the church must always be evangelism. We are to win the lost to Jesus, whether they are neighbors in the same block or neighbors on the other side of the world.

Amy Carmichael, a missionary to India, in telling of a dream she had one night stresses the importance of each of us standing in his place for Christ—carrying out His commission and giving priority to world evangelism.

"The tom-toms thumped on all night and the darkness shuddered around me like a living feeling thing. I could not go to sleep, so I lay awake and looked; what I saw seemed like this.

"I stood on a grassy sward, and at my feet dropped a sheer precipice. Over the edge I looked down into infinite space. There was no bottom. Only cloudy shapes black and furiously coiling, great shadow-draped hollows, and unfathomable depths. I drew back, dizzy.

"Then I saw forms of people moving single-file along the grass. They were making for the edge! There was a woman with a baby in her arms and another little child holding to her dress.

"She was on the very edge . . .

"Then I saw that she was blind . . .

"She lifted her foot for the next step—and she trod air. She was over, and the children with her. Oh, the cry that rent the air!

"Then I saw streams of people coming from all quarters. All were blind, stone blind; all made straight for the edge. There were shrieks as they suddenly felt themselves falling, and a tossing up of helpless arms, catching, clutching at empty air. But some went over quietly and fell without a sound.

"Then I wondered, with a wonder that was agony, why no one stopped them at the edge. I could not. I was glued to the ground, and I could not call, though I strained and tried, only a whisper could come.

"Then I saw that along the edge there were sentries set at intervals. But the intervals were far too great; there were wide, unguarded gaps between. And in these gaps the people fell in their blindness, quite unwarned. The green grass seemed blood red to me and the gulf yawned like the mouth of Hell.

"Then I saw, like the picture of peace, a group of people under some trees, with their backs turned toward the gulf. They were making daisy chains. Some times when a piercing shriek cut the quiet air and reached them, it disturbed them and they thought it a vulgar noise. If one of their number started up and wanted to go to help all the others would pull him down. "Why should you get so excited about it? You must wait for a definite "call" to go. You haven't finished your daisy chains. You must wait for a definite "call" to go. It would really be selfish, they said, to leave us to finish the work alone."

"Once a girl stood alone in her place, waving the people back; but her mother and other relatives called, and, being tired and needing a change, she went to rest awhile; but no one was sent to guard her gap, and the people fell, a waterfall of souls.

"Once a child caught at a tuft of grass that grew at the very brink of the gulf; he clung convulsively and called but nobody seemed to hear. Then the roots gave way, and he dropped, his little fists still holding to the torn-off bunch of grass.

"And the girl who longed to be back in her gap thought she heard the little one cry, and sprang up to go; but her relatives reproved her, reminding her that no one is necessary anywhere—the gap would be well taken care of, they know. And they sang a hymn.

"Then through the hymn came another sound like the pain of a million broken hearts wrung out in one sob. And a horror of great darkness was upon ME, for I knew what it was—the cry of the blood of the dead.

"Then thundered a voice, the voice of the Lord, and He said, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I, send, me. And He said, go and tell this people' . . . Jesus said, 'Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.'"

### III. THE AUTHORITY OF JESUS CHRIST DEMANDS SOCIAL ACTION

We believe it is God's will to try to change the world. Social action is a part of the advancement of God's Kingdom. Jesus gave to His church the keys of the Kingdom and laid special importance on what we bind and loose on *EARTH*. Jesus came preaching, teaching, and healing, and he said to His disciples, "As the Father has sent me, even so send I you." (John 20:21) Jesus wants us to pray sincerely, "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done in *EARTH* as it is in heaven." Social action recognizes that if we are to win people to Jesus Christ we must look upon them as persons created in the image of God and worthy of our love, respect and help. It is difficult to understand the philosophy that suggests, "I want you to go to heaven with me, but I don't want you in my living room or my church."

Not long ago I heard a pastor say, "We have a lot of new people moving into our area, but they are not the kind of people you'd want to build a great church."

A number of years ago in a small town in North Louisiana there lived an Old Mexican woman in a tar paper shack behind the sawmill. Each week the women of the church took her groceries, because she was unable to provide for herself. On a given day the new pastor had arrived on the church field and the women asked him if he would carry the groceries to the old Mexican woman that week. He agreed and soon found himself at her little house where he set the groceries down on a crude table made from scrap lumber. He placed a nail keg beside her old rocking chair and sat down to visit her. He asked about her husband who had been dead a number of years, and about her children who were away in

distant cities. He talked with her about her faith in God, and read from the Bible and prayed with her. As he turned to go, she said, "Young man, I want to thank you for what you have done for me today. You have made me feel that I am a human being—a real person. You see, when the other people come to bring me groceries they just set them down and then go on off—kinda like feedin' a dog. But I felt today as you talked to me that you loved me like Jesus does. Keep that attitude, young man. Keep that attitude and God can use you."

People know whether we are interested in them as persons for whom Jesus died, or in them only as statistics. Involvement consists of more than preaching sermons, writing books, and making lectures about social action. I am convinced that more real personal ministry is performed quietly by the people in the churches than by all the critics who accuse the churches of being out of touch with the real needs of man.

### IV. THE AUTHORITY OF JESUS CHRIST CLARIFIES THE PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS

The Baptist emphasis on the autonomy of our churches and the autonomy of our conventions has spilled over into the attitude of individual Christians. We have interpreted the priesthood of all believers in the light of our independence of any hierarchy. We need to reinterpret it in submission to the authority of Christ, our relationship to each other, and our obligation to serve others as God's representatives.

We are required to set aside our own personal desires to carry out the orders of Jesus Christ. The very word *ekklesia* refers not only to a "calling out" but a "calling together." This involves mutual respect and cooperation. The same spirit of sacrificial love I find essential in the life of my church I shall seek to promote in the life of my denomination. Very frankly, I have little patience with the fellow who is pastor of a Southern Baptist Church, or serves in a Southern Baptist institution who leaves the impression, "I think Southern Baptists are really a 'crummy people.'" Here, too, as in the church, we are all members of the body.

Listen to Paul's admonition in I Corinthians 12: "As the body is one, and has many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ . . . now you are the body of Christ, and members in particular." Earlier in chapter 1, Paul had written: "I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment."

Among us there are those who are most intellectually gifted and those who are less intellectually gifted. There are those who are more emotionally expressive and others who are less demonstrative. There are those who are more successful in evangelism and those who are more interested in social action. As Paul said, "We have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office." (Romans 12:4) "There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit." (I Corinthians 12:4)

How wonderful it is that it is possible for intellectual giants to maintain the sweetness of simple faith. How unfortunate it is for anyone so gifted to assume an attitude of intellectual snobbery.

James Stewart tells of a group of theological students in a Scottish University. They firmly believed that their Hebrew professor, if he prayed at all, did in truth and in fact say his prayers in Hebrew. A few of them had repeatedly heard this legend and decided to see for themselves if it were so or not. One evening, therefore, they crept to the edge of his window and waited until the old Hebrew teacher knelt by his bed to pray. Much to their surprise they heard him say:

"Gentle Savior, meek and mild,  
Look upon a little child.  
Pity my simplicity.  
Suffer me to come to Thee."

"Loving Savior, Gentle Lamb,  
In thy gracious hand I am;  
Make me, Savior, what thou art.  
Live Thyself within my heart."

It is certainly a sin against God to suggest that because a person is intellectual he cannot be "spiritual", or because he is evangelistic he is not interested in social action. Theological professors and pastors must continue to trust each other. Laymen and clergymen must

continue to work and pray together. Let us follow the advice of President Nixon in his inaugural address:

"Greatness comes in simple trappings. The simple things are the ones most needed today if we are to surmount what divides us and cement what unites us.

"To lower our voices would be a simple thing. In these difficult years, America has suffered from a fever of words: from inflated rhetoric that promises more than it can deliver, from angry rhetoric that fans discontents into hatreds, from bombastic rhetoric that postures instead of persuading.

"We cannot learn from one another until we stop shouting at one another—until we speak quietly enough so that our words can be heard as well as our voices."

The following story was once related by a cockfighting enthusiast. He had placed his two prized roosters in a coop and carried them some distance to where an important cockfight was planned. When he removed the coop from the back of his truck, he was dismayed to find both of his birds cut, bleeding, and near death. They had spent the entire trip fighting each other. The angered and despairing owner cried out in disgust: "You fool roosters, didn't you know you were on the same side?"

To our brothers and sisters in Christ we need to say, "We are laborers together with God." And we need to back it up with our deeds and our attitudes.

Let us be at least a part of the answer to the prayer of our Lord: "Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth. As thou hast sent me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, that they also might be sanctified through the truth. Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; that they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one: I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one; and that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them, as thou hast loved me." (John 17:17-23)

## V. THE AUTHORITY OF JESUS CHRIST COMMANDS US TO TAKE UP THE CROSS

On the occasion of our text, when Jesus established his church and gave them the commission to storm the very gates of hell and seek to bring in His kingdom on earth, He made it plain to them that He would die on the cross. He said to them, and He would say to us, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me." (Matthew 16:24)

Let us now at the beginning of this convention, in this hour of worship fix our eyes on Jesus Christ and recapture for ourselves and our denomination a new sense of direction and purpose.

### SOUTHERN BAPTISTS, MEET THE MASTER

We have walked our way with an easy tread;  
We have come where comforts and pleasures led,  
But now today, in this sacred place  
Let us look to Jesus, face to face.

With members and rank and wealth for our goal,  
Much thought for statistics, but less for men's souls,  
We have entered and won religion's race,  
But we need a fresh vision of His face.

We've built our churches and reared them high,  
With their steeples we've pierced the blue of the sky,  
We've dared to push our religious weight!  
But we need to see Jesus, face to face!

To meet Him and know Him and blush to see  
That Southern Baptists are not what we ought to be;  
And worship and fall at His feet today  
Though our castles may melt and vanish away.

Melt and vanish, and in their place  
Nought else be seen, but the Master's face  
And we cry aloud: O make us meet  
To follow the steps of Thy wounded feet.

And our thoughts be turned to the souls of men,  
And we lose ourselves to find Christ again,  
While here today in this sacred place  
We meet the Master, face to face.

## VI. THE AUTHORITY OF JESUS CHRIST GUARANTEES THE ULTIMATE VICTORY

Moffatt's translation of II Corinthians 2:14 is a real encouragement to those who will accept the Cross of Jesus as a way of life. Paul said, "Wherever I go, thank God, he makes my life a constant pageant of triumph in Christ." In Paul's mind there was the picture of a Caesar returning to the City of Rome following a great victory. Before a triumph could be held the campaign had to be completely finished and the victorious troops brought home. First there came the state officials and the senate. Then there came the trumpeters, followed by the spoils of war—treasures and slaves. The priests came swinging their incense pots and then the victorious Caesar came, clad in his royal robes and holding in his hand the sceptre of supreme authority.

In Paul's mind there was another scene. One day there was a pageant of triumph leading into the old Jerusalem. There was our Savior, meek and lowly, riding on an ass, on His way to the cross. And we were there. Our sins nailed Him to the tree. Because He died there for our sins He has conquered us, and gladly we are His slaves and we, too, can say, "Wherever I go, thank God, He makes my life a constant pageant of triumph in Christ."

But I see another pageant of triumph. This time the Savior is leading his followers toward the New Jerusalem—Mission Accomplished. "And after these things I heard a great voice of much people in heaven, saying, Alleluia; Salvation, and glory, and honour, and power, unto the Lord our God. And I heard as it were the voice of a great multitude, and as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of mighty thunderings, saying, Alleluia: for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth. And I saw heaven opened, and behold a white horse; and he that sat upon him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he doth judge and make war. His eyes were as a flame of fire, and on head were many crowns; and he had a name written, that no man knew, but he himself. And he was clothed with a vesture dipped in blood: and his name is called the Word of God. And the armies which were in heaven followed him upon white horses, clothed in fine linen, white and clean. And out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations; and he shall rule them with a rod of iron: and he treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God. And he hath on his vesture and on high thigh, a name written, KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS." (Revelation 19:1, 6, 11-16) "Even so, come Lord Jesus!"