

ON HIGHER GROUND

Convention Sermon

by Russell H. Dilday, Jr.

Russell H. Dilday, Jr., 53, president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, TX, since 1978, is a native of Amarillo, TX. Formerly he served as pastor of four churches—three in Texas, First Baptist, Antelope, First Baptist, Clifton and Tallowood in Houston and one in Georgia; Atlanta, Second Ponce de Leon. His education includes the bachelor of arts (English) from Baylor University, Waco, TX; and the B.D. and doctor of philosophy (religion) from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, TX.

INTRODUCTION

The title of the message is taken from a well-known hymn:

Lord, lift me up and let me stand,
By faith on Heaven's table land,
A higher plane than I have found,
Lord, plant my feet on higher ground.

The biblical text for the message is Philippians 3:14, "I press toward the goal for the prize of the *upward* call of God in Christ Jesus," and Colossians 3:1-2, "If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are *above* where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things *above*, not on things on the earth."

The Bible repeatedly calls us upward to higher ground, to turn our backs on the petty, the trivial, and the unworthy, and to take instead the high road of uncompromising integrity. We are to stand on higher ground with the One who himself is High and Lifted up.

To every man there openeth A Way, and Ways, and a Way,
The High Soul climbs the High Way,
The Low Soul gropes the Low,
And in between, on the misty flats,
The rest drift to and fro,
And every man decideth, The Way his soul shall go.
(John Oxenham)

The challenge of the message to this convention is that we obey the Word of God that calls us to a more excellent way, and redeploy our messengers, our institutions, and our churches to God's table land where they belong.

Our hearts have no desire to stay,
Where doubts arise and fears dismay,
Though some may dwell where these abound,
Our prayer, our aim is Higher Ground.

I. LET'S TURN FROM FORCED UNIFORMITY TO THE HIGHER GROUND OF AUTONOMOUS INDIVIDUALISM

Baptists have stood tall in their courageous defense of individual autonomy. We call it "the priesthood of the believer," "the axiom of soul competency." It's that cherished truth that no one can stand between a person and God except the one mediator, Jesus Christ. No church, no priest, no ordinance, no creed, nothing but Jesus. Our

heroes have been those rugged individuals who died for the right to answer to God for themselves and to worship him as they pleased.

We take that concept of individualism from the Bible. Psalms 49:7 says, "None of them can by any means redeem his brother nor give to God a ransom for him." God created us individually, and each of us is both responsible and free to live his own life. That's why Jesus asked the disciples in Matthew 16:13, not only "Whom do men say that I am?" but "Whom do YOU say that I am?" And one of the clearest verses about individual autonomy is John 18:34, where Jesus confronted Pilate with the question, "Are you speaking for yourself, or did others tell you this?"

But unfortunately, in contradiction to the Bible, there are some among us who, fearful of standing alone, and determined to get ahead in denominational life, surrender that sacred privilege of individualism. They go along with the crowd, accepting the canned thinking of the majority. Swayed by public opinion, and glibly mouthing the popular cliches of the party in power, they are quick to espouse those causes that are in vogue. They cater to the powerful, play to the gallery, and flow with the tide.

Isn't it a shame to be caught in the grip of a mentality like that? Even if only one person among us believes that "to get recommended to a better church you have to signal your loyalty to the party in power by using certain flag words. If you disagree, you'll be labeled. Be careful who you sit with in the sessions or talk to in the halls. Watch out how they see you vote. You may have a deep conviction about the issue being decided, but you'd better raise your hand with the majority." Even if only one believes that, he is one too many. And over the dying ashes of autonomous individualism we will hear the probing question of Jesus, "Are you speaking for yourself, or did others tell you this?"

But lost individualism is a two-sided coin. One side is the fear of standing alone, but the other side is the refusal to let another person stand alone. In his famous novel, George Orwell painted a grim picture of society in 1984, a society of forced uniformity. Everyone was obliged to mouth the party line or else. Spies listened and reported any diverse unorthodoxy to the Ministry of Truth. Individual disagreement was punished as heresy.

Incredible as it sounds, there is emerging in this denomination built on the principle of rugged individualism, an incipient Orwellian mentality. It threatens to drag us down from the high ground to the low lands of suspicion, rumor, criticism, innuendoes, guilt by association and the rest of that demonic family of forced uniformity. I shudder when I see a coterie of the orthodox watching to catch a brother in a statement that sounds heretical, carelessly categorizing churches as liberal or fundamentalist, unconcerned about the adverse effect that criticism may have on God's work. But surely this would never happen in our convention, would it?

Three experiences I've had recently lead me to say it

might happen here. Last year, a pastor publicly critiqued the book I wrote on Biblical Authority. It was a broadside criticism in which he disagreed vehemently with my position. That's O.K., except for the fact that he obviously misunderstood my position. Much of the criticism was so unjustified that it was obvious: he couldn't have read the book. I called him, he acknowledged that he wrote the criticism without having read the book for himself. I sent him a copy, and we eventually established an open relationship of discussion. But as I reflected on that experience, I couldn't help but remember the question of Jesus, "Are you speaking for yourself or did others tell you this?"

Illustration number two. We had on campus recently a preacher who during our recent controversies, has been very vocal in his defense of the denomination. He preached a powerful evangelistic sermon in chapel that moved our student body and visiting guests. There were rousing "Amen's" and spontaneous ovations. After the service, one of our guests said to me, "I was really going to let you have it, Mr. President, for inviting that liberal to preach today, but I was wrong. That was a great message, but do you think he really believes what he preached today?" It was obvious the guest had let other people shape his opinion of our preacher, and I remembered the scripture, "Are you speaking for yourself or did others tell you this?"

Number three. A few years ago I attended one of those Bible Conferences where criticism was so often leveled at our seminaries. The rhetoric was especially hostile that day. Later, upon discovering I was present, some of those who spoke so strongly, came by to say, "I didn't have you in mind. I'm not really with this crowd; I'm for you." Well, the disclaimers may have been sincere, but I couldn't help but remember the Biblical admonition in Colossians 3:22, "Serve the Lord with singleness of heart, not with eyeservice as men-pleasers," and the passage: "Are you speaking for yourself or did others tell you this?"

How much better to be a Godly individualist who with open mind listens to all sides of an issue, prayerfully measures those issues by the Word of God, and then humbly takes a position and stands courageously by it no matter what others think. How much better, like Luther, facing abuse if necessary, to say, "Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise, God helping me." And how much better to allow that same freedom to others without pressing for lock-step uniformity. That's the rugged individualism to which the Bible calls us. And that's the higher ground where we Baptists have stood and where we need to stand today.

II. LET'S TURN FROM POLITICAL COERCION TO THE HIGHER GROUND OF SPIRITUAL PERSUASION

Jesus made it unmistakably clear by his commands and example that the power we are to employ in our work for him is not political or conscriptive power, but spiritual power. Consistently, Jesus refused to use even subtle coercion in his mission. He rejected the low ground of political force and chose instead the higher ground of spiritual persuasion.

Our Saviour wept over Jerusalem, but he never besieged it, never rallied its legislature or courts to favor his cause, never formed a political coalition to advance his kingdom. He preached, and prayed, and served, and loved, and to the end he steadfastly rejected worldly force. Jesus chose the higher ground of spiritual persuasion.

Heaven's entire angelic army was at his command. With

the snap of a finger, he could have brought Herod and Pilate to their knees in surrender and enthroned himself as King in Jerusalem. But he didn't. John 6:15 says, "Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself." He came not to be an autocrat, but a servant leader.

John 9:54 says that even though James and John thought it was a great idea, Jesus would not call down fire from heaven on those who disagreed with him. Respecting that fragile treasure of free will, Jesus refused to manipulate, coerce, or commandeer the people. He chose persuasion, reason, and love as his weapons. He who could wither a fig tree with a spoken rebuke, and with one word de-fang a howling windstorm into a whimpering breeze, would not force his will on others. Jesus could have pulled the trigger of his power and with one divine laser blast vaporized the ones who nailed him to the cross, but instead he prayed, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do."

In Matthew 26:52 Simon Peter drew his weapon in the garden, and Jesus rebuked him, "Put your sword back into its place, for all who take up the sword will perish by the sword." We can learn from that verse, for it may seem appropriate at times for us to enlist the civil powers of the state in our witness for Christ. But beware, that's the low road to the misty swamps, not the way to God's higher ground.

Go ahead. Engage the government as your ally. Since you're a major political force today, and hold the power to influence Congress, breach the wall of separation and bend the guarantees of religious liberty a little bit so that your faith enjoys the support of the state. If the sword of Federal support is offered, grasp it and use it. But remember, our Lord said, "They that live by the sword shall die by the sword."

Call on Big Brother in Washington to help you witness and worship, and Big Brother will trivialize your Lord, sanctioning his sacred birth as nothing more than a folk festival, giving Bethlehem's manger no more significance than Rudolph's red nose. Ask the Supreme Court to endorse your Christian faith, and they will relegate the virgin-born Jesus, the only begotten of the Father, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, they will relegate him to the company of Santa Claus, Frosty the Snowman and Alvin the Caroling Chipmunk.

Better to have enemies who know who Christ is and detest him, than political friends in high places who classify the eternal incarnation with fairy tale symbols of godless folklore.

No wonder Jesus said to Simon, the would-be swordsman, "Stop! No more of this! I need no political allies. Do you think that I cannot appeal to my father and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But I will not stoop to coercive arm twisting. Put away your sword; for all who take up the sword shall perish by the sword."

Some day in the future, as so often in the past, other political forces, hostile to religious liberty, will hold the advantage. They will have the political clout you have today, and they may breach that crack you so casually made in the wall of separation, and circumvent the guarantees you brazenly bent a little bit, and they may steal away the liberty you carelessly abused. And future generations of Americans will look back on our twentieth century and wonder what happened to that country which a Baptist musician described as "sweet land of liberty".

Have you ever studied the sad experience of Baptists in Germany during Hitler's rise to power? We who've never lived under a repressive regime like the Third Reich should be slow to condemn, but the lessons of their failure are so timely. Church historian Stephen Brachlow has a disturbing study you ought to read.

German Baptists, rightly concerned about immorality in their country in the 1930's rallied behind Hitler's drive to rid society of pornography, prostitution, homosexuality, and other social sins. Deceived by the Orwellian double-speak of Nazi propaganda, and impressed with Hitler's righteous campaign against degenerates, and his pious commitment to what he called "positive Christianity," German Baptists temporarily lost sight of their traditional antipathy toward establishment religion. They developed alliances with the government and received unprecedented privileges while other religious groups were being persecuted. As one Baptist leader put it, "the German Finance Ministry favored Baptist churches in tax matters and the Secret Police were uninterruptedly friendly." For the first time in 100 years German Baptists enjoyed the paternal care of their government. In contrast to their forebears who had struggled as a persecuted minority, they were now the privileged ones.

They dismissed the government restrictions placed on Lutheran and Evangelical congregations as divine judgment for the years they had harassed Baptist churches. So long as they remained unmolested by the authorities, these Baptists shrank from endangering their own privileged freedom by challenging the state. And they discovered too late that they were duped.

The lesson is clear. Individual Baptists should be involved as Christian citizens at every level of our democratic processes of government, but only to insure that personal freedom and justice are maintained, never to secure privileged support from the state nor encourage its entanglement in religious affairs. We must never give up our historic concern for religious liberty. Even when we find ourselves in positions of prominence and in league with the powerful, we must not fail to protect the freedom of the minorities who differ from us.

Oh twentieth century Baptists, where is your distinctive Biblical Message: "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's"? Where is your voice so consistently raised in past days for religious liberty? Where is your ancient conviction that it is "not by might nor by power, but by God's spirit" that we conquer? We should put away the sword of government alliance and political clout, and reclaim instead our historical Baptist legacy of separation of church and state. We must choose, as Jesus did, to employ only spiritual weapons. For Baptists stand tallest when we look not to a benevolent uncle in Washington, but to an omnipotent father in Heaven. Let's turn from political coercion to the higher ground of Spiritual Persuasion.

III. LET'S TURN FROM EGOTISTIC SELF-INTEREST TO THE HIGHER GROUND OF CHRIST-LIKE HUMILITY

Who can forget that embarrassing incident in Mark 10:37 when James and John asked their special favor of Jesus. He had just predicted in graphic detail how he would soon be crucified, how they would mock him, scourge him, spit on him, and kill him. And do you remember how James and John responded to that solemn

prediction? They said to Jesus, "Grant us that we may sit, one on your right hand and the other on your left in your glory." Incredible! In fact, it seems Jesus was always catching the disciples at each other's throats about who was the greatest. No wonder the Holy Spirit inspired Paul to write in Philippians 2:3-7:

Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem another better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interest, but also for the interests of others. Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who being in the form of God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but emptied himself by taking the form of a servant . . .

The moment we imitate James and John in looking for personal advancement, or the moment we imitate the Pharisees in seeking the chief seats, in that moment we are bogged down in the muddy flats of egotistic self-interest. But the moment we imitate Jesus, let his lowliness of mind be our example, in that moment we climb to the higher ground of Christ-like humility.

Weren't you shocked to read that the U.S. government, following the military rescue mission in Grenada, awarded 8614 decorations for bravery in action? We were shocked because only 7000 troops were involved in the fighting. Many of the medals for bravery under fire went to bureaucrats in the Pentagon or Fort Bragg who sat behind desks and were never in danger. We really know how to congratulate ourselves, don't we? Somebody said God created us with our arms out in front to make it almost impossible to pat ourselves on the back, but we learned to do it anyway. We're experts at giving ourselves medals, promoting our own careers, and looking out for number one.

I had lunch a while back with a famous television evangelist who is often introduced as "The Next Billy Graham." His secretary called to ask if I would please arrange for a private room. She said the evangelist was so well-known that he could never eat in a public restaurant. His fans would mob him and interrupt his meal. Well, it sounded a little presumptuous, but I followed her suggestion for privacy.

However, I couldn't help but remember my moment of glory a few years ago in Atlanta when I entertained the REAL Billy Graham. The crusade committee asked me to arrange a golf game and a luncheon one Monday. I was really excited. The best clubs were closed on Mondays, so I pulled strings and enlisted the famous golf pro at the Atlanta Country Club to open his course just for Dr. Graham and our foursome. Then I set up an elegant luncheon in one of Atlanta's best restaurants.

But when I called Dr. Graham to tell him my plans, do you know what HE asked me to arrange? After hearing my suggestions, he thanked me, but humbly asked if we might make some changes. He would rather play at a public golf course and eat at a cafeteria near the hotel. I couldn't believe it.

When I picked him up, Dr. Graham had on an old golf cap and dark sun glasses, we played on the sorriest golf course in Atlanta, right under the flight path of the Airport. Then, believe it or not, we pushed our trays through the line at Morrisons Cafeteria for lunch. There I was fighting an irresistible urge to point to this man in golf cap and sun glasses to say to everybody, "Do you know who this is? Do you know who I'm with?" No one

recognized him until half-way through the meal, and he greeted that one nervous intruder graciously and kindly. The contrast between the two men was startling. One walked in the misty flats of self interest, the other walked on higher ground.

What do you think Jesus, who rebuked James and John for their petty self-promotion, would say about our blatant scramble for denominational chief seats today? It sounds so much like the egotistic self-interest of the Sons of Thunder, doesn't it? "We've been left out, it's our turn to be elected, put us on the boards and committees, give us the positions." When proud brokers of power manipulate the democratic processes of this convention in order to promote themselves, they've slipped from the high ground to the misty swamps of selfish ambition and conceit. And the Bible says, "Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem another better than himself."

What ever happened to the biblical concept of servant leadership? Lloyd Elder is right when he says we must examine our denominational reward system. We have so glamorized some standards of success that the other standards which are so essential to winning our world to Christ have been overlooked. Dr. Elder said:

Right now the reward system is based not on faithfulness, but largeness and notoriety. You have to make it to the headlines in order to be recognized among the brethren as being faithful in ministry. Super churches are important, but we must begin to recognize the super work being done by untold thousands in smaller congregations.

We don't need "king of the mountain" competition today, we need compassionate cooperation. God didn't put us here to see through each other. He put us here to see each other through. I Peter 5:5-6 says, "All of you by submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for God resisteth the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time."

The first chapter of John's Gospel describes the first man to carry the name Baptist. He was the forerunner of Jesus. Jesus called him the greatest man who ever lived. But look again at that first chapter. Every reference to John the Baptist is one of personal depreciation. Verse 8 says: "he was NOT that light, but was sent to bear witness of that light." In verse 15 John the Baptist says of himself, "He who comes after me was before me. He has a higher rank than I have." He claims in verse 27: "He who comes after me is preferred before me. His sandal straps I am not worthy to unlatch."

John's enemies thought it would make him jealous when they told him in Chapter 10 that Jesus was baptizing more people than he was. (What would some of our preachers say if they were told that a neighboring pastor reported more baptisms than they did?) John's response was, "I must decrease; He must increase." In John 1:20 a dele-

gation from Jerusalem asked him, "Who are you?" His reply: "I am NOT the Christ. I'm not the Prophet, I'm not even Elijah. I am a voice."—literally a PHONO—that's all, a voice.

Ask a compass, "Are you north?" No answer; it just swings its faithful arrow toward the magnetic pole and points. Ask John, "Are you the light?" No answer, he just points to Jesus and says, "Behold the Lamb of God." John made humility a sacred art form. He never filed an IRS tax return, but if he had, his "personal depreciation schedule" would have been a classic!

But isn't it a shame today when a person becomes the focus of his own ministry? When self-promotion, autocratic leadership styles and success goals become our highest priorities? Or worse, isn't it tragic when a church begins to worship its pastor instead of the Lord who called him, focusing on the herald instead of the King. No matter how great your pastor is, he's not the light, he's just a PHONO, just a voice pointing to the true light, announcing the King whose sandals none of us is worthy to unlatch.

Let's reclaim that vanishing quality of humility that was personified by Jesus and lived out so convincingly by John, the first Baptist. Let's turn from egotistic self-interest to the higher ground of Christ-like humility.

Conclusion

When Nehemiah, the cupbearer to King Artaxerxes, was busy obeying God's command to rebuild the walls around Jerusalem, he was tempted to turn from his lofty work to take up lesser pursuits. His response to that temptation is the one I pray Southern Baptists will give. It's in Nehemiah 6:3, "I am doing a great work and I cannot come down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and come down to you?"

Stay on the heights, Southern Baptists. You're doing a great work. Stay close to the Lord and to the task he has called you to perform. Be faithful to your historic heritage. Don't dabble in controversies or exhaust your energies arm-wrestling for denominational control. This convention is too valuable to let it become a volleyball bounced back and forth across the political net by shrewd game players. Stay on higher ground of spiritual persuasion, autonomous individualism, the Christ-like humility where you belong.

Shakespeare was right, "They that stand high have many blasts to shake them." But when we stand high with Christ those blasts will not be jealous pot-shots we lob at each other; they will be Satan's blasts hurled against a united family of faith. And we won't be afraid, because we'll be with the one who promised to make us more than conquerors. We'll be on higher ground.

So, Southern Baptists, our prayer should be:

Lord, lift us up and let us stand,
By faith, on heaven's table land,
A higher plan than we have found,
Lord, plant our feet on higher ground.