

Convention sermon
Jack Graham

Now I recognize that this is an awesome assignment and responsibility. It's very important when you speak anytime to know who's in your audience. I recognize that this is a fantastic and phenomenal group of people called the Southern Baptist Convention. And I recognize that we've got some powerful, powerful people in this building, so I sort of feel like the man who went to heaven and Simon Peter introduced him around and this man said "well, I tell you, I had a great experience I'd like to share with everybody, how I survived the Jamestown flood." He said "would you just get everybody together, I want to tell them, I want to testify how I survived the Jamestown flood." And Simon Peter said "That's fine, we'll get everybody together and you can tell them how you survived the Jamestown flood, but just remember, when you speak, Noah is in your audience."

Now I realize there's a lot of Noahs here today, and Mrs. Noahs and I come before you with a great deal of respect and thanksgiving for this privilege and for you.

My text is Romans 1:16. "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ for it is the power of God unto salvation do everyone who believes, do the Jew first and also to the Greek."

Years ago when the Green Bay Packers were the world champions, Vince Lombardi their legendary coach. The Packers weren't playing very well, they were missing blocking assignments, they were not practicing the fundamentals they were not practicing very well, they weren't playing well. Coach Lombardi was quite upset with them and the team was upset with themselves. So the coach got them all together and Vince Lombardi holding up a football said, "gentlemen, let's start over. This is a football." And one of those giant athletes said "Coach, would you mind going over that again?"

Well I want to say to you today, ladies and gentlemen, this is the gospel of Jesus Christ and amidst the confusion of our times, even with the church of Jesus Christ is often confused as to who we are, what we are to be and what we say to our world. I want to hold up the word of God and say ladies and gentlemen, this is the gospel of Jesus Christ. Let's not be ashamed of that gospel.

Now the apostle Paul was a confident man and he believed that his product the product of God actually was the only message and the only product that Jesus Christ had. Everything else is a byproduct. No matter how good, no matter how valuable, the product is the gospel and we must never be apologetic in this generation or any generation of God's gospel, the gospel of Jesus Christ. For it is God's power, it is God's message and we ought to be confident.

I like the confidence of the apostle Paul, sort of like that little boy in his backyard with his ballcap pulled over his head and he had a bat in one hand and a ball in the other hand. He said "I am the world's greatest hitter." He threw up the ball and he swung with all his might and missed it. Strike one. But not to be deterred, he said, "I am the world's greatest hitter." And he got his bat again, threw it up, swung with all of his might and missed it again, strike two. But he was confident. He said "I am the world's greatest hitter." He threw up that ball one last time, swung with a mighty swish and missed it again. Strike three. But this little guy, not to be deterred, said "I am the world's greatest pitcher." I like that kind of confidence. That kind of confidence can't be beat, and with that kind of confidence, not in himself, but in the gospel of Jesus Christ, Paul said "Moreover brethren, I declare unto you the gospel." Now that Christ died for our sins according to the scripture, that he was buried and rose again according to the scripture.

So today as we hold up the gospel in all its powerful and beautiful and yet simple expression, I want you to think with me first of all about the gospel and our culture.

We've heard often at this convention of the cultural war, the battles that we are now fighting for the heart and the soul of our nation and our world. Before our very eyes we've seen our culture change and it is at this very moment in the process of changing dramatically. I was born in 1950 in a

2.

little town in Arkansas and grew up in the 50s, those happy days and many of us remember those days. But something had to get happening in the heart and soul of America in the late 50s and early 60s and the baby boomers, became the 60s generation and we all remember some of the changes that were inaugurated in our culture at that time and then on through the 70s and the 80s. And now as we face the 90s I am reminded of an experience I had with my children. We went out to Six Flags with a children's group. Down there at Six Flags in Arlington, Texas, we got a roller coaster that we claim is the world's largest wooden roller coaster and we got on that roller coaster. I got on the roller coaster with my kid and we were going up and you know at first, it was a nice ride. Just click, click, click, nice and slow, nice and easy up up up, we were having a nice conversation, we looked at the view, I looked over at my left and there was Ft Worth and that looked good and I looked over to my right and there was Dallas and as we got a little higher, there was Kansas City, and as we got to the top, every thing was so beautiful, everything was so nice, but then suddenly, something happened, and we went over the edge. And as we were barrelling down that track everything was distorted, everything was confused and one word kept coming to my mind all the way down....chiropractor.

Finally when I got off that ride, I promised God I would never get on it again. But I've later reflected, you know that ride is a parable of what has happened to us as a nation and as a people, what's happened to the church of Jesus Christ and many Christians, we've been along for the ride. Enjoying the scenery, enjoying the view and then suddenly, seemingly without expectation, we are now over the edge. And we are pouring our lives down the track and we are barreling into the depths of despair as a nation. We are, in fact, by all accounts, losing the cultural war of our society. It seems that we are outnumbered, and outvoted, the moral issues, the critical issues that we believe as Christians, the family values are now being called into question. Ted Turner recently in the Dallas Morning News said that Christianity is for losers. He went on to talk about how the Ten Commandments are archaic and ancient and since nobody believes them anymore, we might as well discard them. And in the place of the Ten Commandments, Ted Turner suggested that we replace them with what he called the Ten Voluntary Initiatives.

Those of us who are ministers and those of us who serve in churches who are picking up the pieces of people's lives, know what can happen when people start living by voluntary initiatives rather than divine imperatives. Some say that our values as Christians are prehistoric. Well that's right, they are prehistoric, they were ordained and settled in the heart of God before time began, the values of God's word.

And while it appears that our situation is very ominous, I'm grateful that we're sent abounds grace much more abounds and that the gospel of Jesus Christ is the power of God and while we live in a world which is a veritable smorgasbord of sin you can look at Romans 1 find it repeated in our society when God took his hand up off society God gave them up God gave them up God gave them up and his judgment the natural consequences of sin people ask will God judge America, God is judging America by taking his hand off the lid and letting us experience the consequences of our own sin. That is our culture. Do we have anything to say to a culture like that?

Well some have suggested that we be proponents of a kinder and gentler evangelism, that we begin to soft-toss the message, that we don't say anything controversial for fear of running someone off, that we don't expose sin or call it by its first name, that we don't speak of Hell and judgment. I remember what Dr. R.G. Lee used to say, some accused him of being cruel for speaking of hell. He said, "I would rather be called cruel, for being kind than to be called kind for being cruel." And have you noticed the more people understand what the gospel is, and who Jesus is, the more hostile they become to the message and to the church itself. You ask the average person on the street, "what do you think about Jesus?" The average person says Jesus was fine, Jesus was a great moral teacher, a great religious leader, we respect Jesus, we admire Jesus. But if you start delineating and defining the message of Jesus, who said, "I am the way the truth and the light and no man comes to the Father but by me," when you

really declare who Jesus is and what Jesus has said then you will find the hostility brewing and the anger. We are called bigots because we believe what we believe about Jesus Christ, that Jesus is not simply the greatest and the best, He is the one and only Jesus. And when you start talking in those terms, all hell breaks loose in the streets.

I've been told that the next great wave of theological debate will be in terms of annihilationism when men die they like animals, or that God in judgment would never send a man in his wider mercy would never send a man a woman or allow that man or woman to experience conscious torment apart from Him forever and ever in a place called hell. So it is convenient, it is nicer to say, it is kinder and gentler to say that mankind will simply be annihilated. It all sounds good. Maybe even in our hearts we would like to believe it but we can't believe it when our gospel tells us that its the bad news that makes the good news so very good. I also believe that if there was more hell preached in the pulpits there would be less hell in our schools, and less hell in the streets and less hell in the homes.

We are living in what some people call the post-Christian era. And it does seem in America that every institution is now in the hands of secularists and humanists. Whether you are talking about law, or government or media and even God help us the church, but in spite of all of that Christianity in its formation, early birthing and breeding early on did not simply survive in hostile periods of history, did not survive in hostile environments but has thrived in the greatest times of testing. And I believe that our recent setbacks will only galvanize the true church of the Lord Jesus Christ and help us get back to the basis, what is the church of God preaching the gospel of God in the power of the spirit of God. Because after all Jesus said, the gates of hell will not prevail against my church, and in spite of the anti-Christian bias in the media, in spite of being out-voted, outnumbered and seemingly defeated, in spite of all the political aspirations and political slogans, what are these compared to the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ? They are nothing.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is a saving gospel. We used to hear about the social gospel. I don't believe there is a social gospel. There's one gospel its the saving gospel of Jesus Christ. Now the saving gospel of Jesus Christ has many social implications and applications. We're finding in our church the greatest ministry, the greatest evangelism that we are doing is when we get involved in the great social issues of our time in helping hurting people who are lost without Jesus Christ. But there is still just one and only one gospel and we must preach it. And that brings me to my second idea -- and that is the gospel and the church.

The supremacy of the gospel is evident in this verse of scripture, it is the power of God --Dynamis-- the dynamic energized inerrant power of God. When God created this universe he spoke and the power of God gave us the handiwork of God in this creation. It is the same power of God in Bethlehem when God invaded the virgin's womb and in the power the Holy Spirit great is the mystery of godliness, that God was manifest in the flesh. That power of God that gave us the incarnation, the power of God at the cross. When God created this universe, he spoke in his power, his power was revealed in glory, when God wanted to reveal his power in grace Jesus his own darling son died upon the cross and in that cross there was the power of God. There's the power of resurrection the central and cardinal message of our faith that Christ is alive. That same incarnational power that same power of the cross that redemptive power, that same power of the resurrection is the power in the gospel.

And God has promised if we will preach it, if we will share it, even if it is not popular, and it isn't popular, it will always be powerful. And so we preach it. Now I'm concerned if we've gotten more interested in some cases in style rather than substance. Packaging the gospel, rather than proclaiming the gospel. You remember those vice-presidential debates, when Admiral Stockdale went up against Dan Quayle and Albert Gore and in that televised setting in that media rich setting, Admiral Stockdale didn't come off very well did he? he couldn't hear what the others were saying. He seemed confused by the lights and the camera. He wasn't able to communicate his message very well, and the papers hooted, and the people howled. But

what many of us may not realize about Admiral Stockdale is that he was voted the outstanding professor of Stanford University in California. One of the most brilliant minds in our world today one many did not realize is that the Admiral was the first one in Vietnam and one of the last ones out of Vietnam. During his tenure he was imprisoned as a POW beaten almost daily, and in that prisoner's camp, lost hearing in his ear and so he wears a hearing aid. He doesn't hear all that well, but because he didn't have the right style, people rejected the substance of what he had to say.

A lot of folks that think you have to have just the right style, right look and the right marketing approach, but how clever do you have to be to simply say Jesus is Lord and Jesus and Jesus only will heal the hearts of brokenhearted humanity.

We are discovering in Dallas in our north Dallas community and in our church, in a people's church you can see on one pew the same pew, a man with megabucks and on that same pew a little boy that we brought in on our buses and we are discovering that regardless of class, regardless of culture, regardless of creed, regardless of a man's country the gospel is the only power that can save and make a difference in our society. It is our high impact message, the supremacy of the gospel and we dare not emasculate that gospel, because that's the only promise of power that we have, else we'll become just another voice among the many rabbled voices in the crowd today.

Now we've heard a lot lately about an expensive haircut, that was taken on Air Force One, but you know that haircut was not the most expensive haircut in history. The most expensive haircut in history was when Samson got a haircut in Deliah's barbershop. She just had one name too. You better be careful getting your hair cut by a person with just one name. And the Bible tells us that when he was shorn of his hair that all of his power and all of his strength left him, but the tragedy is that it says there that he did not know that his strength was gone, that he became as other men.

The gospel is our power our strength. When we decide isn't powerful enough, it isn't effective enough, that we have to package the gospel just right in order for it to be effective, if we are not careful, we will become as other men, as other denominations, on the graveyard of ecclesiastical history, because the only message that God has promised to bring fruit and fruit that remains is message of the gospel of Jesus.

People don't like the gospel because its confrontational. I'm even hearing some say in church growth books and manuals we shouldn't be confrontational with the gospel. I remember being in a debate amongst some ministers, we were talking about reaching. One was advocating that we never say anything controversial in the pulpit, that we don't expose sin, because people already know that they are sinners so why should we tell them that they are sinners. But did you know what people don't know about their sin is the seriousness of that sin, and the judgment of a Holy God on that sin. And when we expose their sin, unless we expose sin, how will they ever get under the conviction of the Holy Spirit who is come to convict the world of sin and righteousness and judgment.

Some say the gospel is not to be confrontational, others say the gospel's not to be invitational. I realize the public invitation is a method not a principle but there is a principle behind the method. The principle is that innately within the gospel it is an invitation. It is a proclamation, a declaration, also an invitation and that invitation is whosoever will may come. I'm grateful every Sunday and every time we get together as a church for the privilege of not only proclaiming the gospel and sharing the gospel but inviting people forward to respond to the gospel. Because that gospel, though controversial, and though invitational is also transformational because only the gospel works.

Everything else is failing. But the gospel is not true because it works, if all we are saying is the gospel is true because it works, we're no different than the New Agers and other cults, who say experience this and you will be well and you will be saved. The gospel is not true because it works, the gospel works because it is true. And while everything else changes around us that one thing must never change and the change of the human heart and the life of the soul lost without Jesus Christ is still the priority mission and message of the church.

Say Jack isn't that the same old stuff -- same old stuff, the gospel. Have you ever noticed how old athletes never get tired of talking about their accomplishments on the athletic field. That championship game, that base hit, that touchdown run. I mean they tell it like it happened yesterday. Or how old soldiers never get tired of talking about those battles, and those victories, you can almost smell the gunpowder, when they tell it. They never get tired of talking about something, its a great memory and a great present reality and folks, if we have experienced the gospel, the saving gospel of Jesus Christ if our lives have been transformed by that message of Jesus Christ. If we've been changed from the inside-out and if we love Jesus Christ we won't ever get tired of telling that same old, old story that Jesus saves. Its always fresh, its always brand new. Every time we tell it.

I remember the first time I was challenged to tell it. After we moved to Ft. Worth, Texas as a teenager I became a member of the Sagamore Baptist Church. The legendary Dr. W. Fred Swank was the pastor, my pastor. Every summer hundreds of young people from the east side of Ft. Worth would go to camp. Daily Dr. Swank would get the young men aside and take us down to the prayer garden and challenge us, to be young men of God. I remember when Dr. Swank challenged us around that old prayer garden of Lakeland Springs Baptist encampment at Hillsboro. And he challenged us to go home and win one friend to Christ. And he asked us to promise God that we would do it. And as a 15-year-old, about to be sophomore in high school, I promised God I'd try. Went to Eastern Hills High School in Ft. Worth, it was registration day. I sat down alphabetically and one of the meanest guys in school, old Jeeter Fullbright. Old Jeeter was the kind of guy who would just as soon knock you down as look at you. And I was sitting there and was reminded of my promise to tell someone about Jesus. And I said, "Oh dear God, not him." There in the registration line I tried, stumbling all the way through to tell Jeeter about Jesus. I think I said something like "Jeeter, you wouldn't want to get saved would you?" And to my amazement, that big burly young man said yes. I had the privilege of bowing with him there in the line and see him receive Christ. The first person I had the privilege to lead to Christ.

And you know through the years as I began to preach as a young man and pastor churches that experience, it hasn't happened as many times as it should have, but every time it happens when I see the power of the gospel explode in the heart and life of a person who did not know Christ is as exciting to me and as thrilling to me as that very first time, when old Jeeter bowed his head and gave his heart to Christ.

I just want to make a public rededication and I want to challenge each one of us as members of our churches as members of this congregation and this convention that we would tell that old old story over and over and over again. Lets don't back up, let's don't shut up, let's keep on telling for I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ. My pastor pastored that church at Sagamore Hills for 43 years and he lived by this one verse. And I want to leave that verse with you that Dr. Swank passed along to me. First Corinthians 15:58 "Therefore my beloved brethren be ye steadfast unmovable always abounding in the work of the Lord, for as much as you know, your labor is not in vain in the lord." Let the church be the church.