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Here We Stand Now and Forever

by James G. Merritt

The convention sermon by James G. Merritt, pastor of First Baptist Church, Snellville, Ga., and Executive Committee chairman, delivered June 10, 1998 in Salt Lake City, Utah.

want to thank the president for his invitation to deliver this message. I realize the great giants who have stood in this place before me, and I want to tell you what I told the Lord. I'm so humbled to be here and I do not preach because I am worthy, but I do preach because He is worthy.

I want you to take God's Word and find the Book of Jude, the next to the last book in the New Testament. The title of my message today is "Here We Stand Now and Forever."

It is not lost on me that I am preaching the Convention sermon here in this particular city. For Salt Lake City is both the mainstay of a cultural conservatism for which I am grateful, but it is also the headquarters of a counterfeit Christianity of which I am fearful. Even though we value our Mormon friends and neighbors, share common moral concerns with them, and understand their desire to be considered a Christian denomination, make no mistake. There is a gulf of doctrinal and theological differences which separate them completely from orthodox Christianity and will separate them continuously until they return to the faith once for all delivered to the saints.

And, yet, my message is not concerned primarily with Mormonism, or for that fact any "ism." The burden of my message is for that group nearest and dearest to my heart called Southern Baptists. And I trust that you will see my concern illustrated and illuminated by this question: What do Harvard, Yale, Columbia, Dartmouth, William & Mary, Brown, and Princeton all have in common? They were all founded by Christians for the primary purpose of promoting Christianity and training preachers of the gospel.1

Last year I was in Boston, Massachusetts with my youngest son, Joshua. I went to the campus of Harvard University, the oldest college in America, named after the Reverend John Harvard. I located the cornerstone of that prestigious university, and found these words that had been etched in bronze over 350 years ago:

"After God had carried us safe to New England, and wee had builded our houses, provided necessaries for livelihood, reared convenient places for God's worship, and settled the civil government, one of the next things wee longed



James G. Merritt preaching the convention sermon in the Salt Palace Convention Center.

for and looked after was to advance learning and perpetuate to prosperity, dreading to leave an illiterate ministry to the churches, when our present ministers shall lie in the dust."

In other words, the very first institution of higher learning ever established in America was founded to train preachers of the gospel of Iesus Christ. A fund-raising booklet circulated in New England stated that the purpose of Harvard College was to lead a student "to know God and Jesus Christ which is eternal life, and there ever to lay Christ in the bottom as the only foundation of all sound learning and knowledge."2

Princeton University, at its inception, made it mandatory that faculty members be convinced of the "necessity of the religious experience of salvation."3 John Witherspoon, the president of Princeton University, said "Cursed be all learning that is contrary to the cross of Christ."4

When Brown University was founded, its charter stipulated that twenty-two of its twenty-nine trustees had to be Baptist and its president "forever a member of the Baptist church!"5

Dartmouth was founded to train missionaries to the Indians. William and Mary was created "... that the Christian faith might be propagated." Early advertisement for Columbia University read "The chief thing that is aimed at in this college is to teach and engage children to know God in Jesus Christ."6

And, yet, today, every single one of these institutions are bastions of secular humanism where Christianity is, at best, barely tolerated and, at worst, openly ridiculed. You say, "James, what

happened?" Well, the answer is both sad but simple. God's people did not take seriously this warning from the apostle, Jude. Listen to it in verses 3 and 4.

"Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to content earnestly for the faith, which was once for all delivered to the

have crept in unnoticed who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, our God into lewdness and denied the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ."

Southern Baptists, when we fail to heed this admonition, we wind up with a Wake Forest.

saints. For certain men

We wind up with a Stetson. We wind up with a

Furman. And listen to me carefully, these institutions were not lost by design; they were lost by default.

Learn this and learn it well. Institutions, whether they be governments, schools, churches, or denominations, are like a car out of line. Without a firm hand on the wheel, they always drift and they never veer to the right; they always veer to the left.

Dr. James Boyce, the founder and first president of Southern Seminary, realized this as he looked around him and saw the loss of one institution after

another to liberalism and humanism, and determined to safeguard his seminary. He designed the abstract of principles and he gave this reason : "A crisis in Baptist doctrine is evidently approaching. And those of us who still cling to the doctrines which formerly distinguished us have the important duty to perform, of earnestly contending for the faith, once

Part of being a Baptist ungodly men who turned the grace of is the willingness

> to stand up for what is right and to speak up

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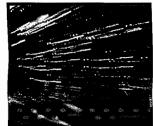
world remains silent.

for all delivered to the saints." And then he said: "Gentlemen, God will call us to judgment if we neglect it."7

Hear me and hear me well, the battle for the soul of our denomination, our colleges, our seminaries, our churches, even for the Bible itself, will never be over. There may be a cease-fire, but Jude says you can never let your guard

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I heard about a Quaker farmer who had a cantankerous cow. That cow kept kicking over the bucket every time he tried to milk her. As mild-mannered as he was, finally even his patience ran out, and exasperated, he walked around to the front of that cow and pointed his finger in her face. He said, "Thou knowest that I cannot kick thee. Thou knowest that I cannot curse thee. Thou knowest that I cannot beat thee. But what thou may not knowest is I can sell thee

Well, my friend, I want to tell you something. Part of being a Baptist is the willingness to stand up for what is right and to speak up against what is wrong, even if the rest of the world remains silent. And if we are not only going to survive, but thrive as a tool in the hands of God until Jesus comes, we must follow the admonitions that Jude

Now, you will notice what he is writing — an exhortation. So I have come today not to admonish you, my brothers and sisters, but yes, to exhort you. I want to give you three exhortations right out of these two verses that we must follow if we are going to continue to be used by God. Listen to me carefully.

Jude says We must be diligent extenders of the faith. Get it down. We must be diligent extenders of the faith.

Notice that Jude never intended to write the book that bears his name. He never intended to write a book defending the faith. He intended to write a book declaring the faith. In essence, what he really wanted to write was a gospel tract. He says in verse 3. "I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation."

That says something to me about where we are right now as Southern Baptists. Let me say two things about salvation. Salvation should ignite us. The Greek word there for diligence is the word spoude, which gives us the English word speed. In other words, Jude said, "I could hardly wait to talk about salvation." That was the passion of his heart. That was the fire in his bones. That was the obsession of his life. He could have written on

Oh, yes, we have

turned this denomination salvation is what brings us around theologically.

It is now time we

should be eternally thankful. I

turned this denomination was educated for seven years in a Southern Baptist seminary around evangelistically. out the help of the Cooperative Program. But, my dear friends, the

practically any subject he wanted to. He said I just want to write about salvation. That was the bottom line for Jude.

It ought to be the bottom line for us. Southern Baptists, nothing should excite us more than hearing salvation, getting salvation, having salvation, and spreading salvation. It's what we ought to write about, sing about, preach about, talk about, and shout about because there is nothing like being saved. It was his first love; it ought to be

It's one thing to castigate the doctrine of the Mormons, but would to God we would emulate the devotion of the Mormons. We ought to have more zeal to spread that which is true than they do to spread that which is false.

Now, I do thank God that for the first time in over fifteen years, this denomination reported over 400,000 baptisms. But let me give you the rest of the story. Ten thousand Southern Baptist churches, that is almost 25 percent, reported no baptisms whatsoever. Over half of our Southern Baptist churches, almost 25,000, reported six

baptisms or less. In 1950, it took nineteen Southern Baptists to win a soul to Christ and baptize him. Today it takes thirty-nine. Oh, yes, we have turned this denomination around theologically. It is now time we turned this denomination around evangelistically.

In September of 1985, there was a party held at one of the largest city pools in New Orleans. Here is what they were celebrating. For the first summer in many years, they did not have one person drown in any of their pools. Well, the summer was over. They decided to throw a big party and celebrate the fact nobody had drowned in any pool all summer long. There were over 200 guests at the celebration, including over 100 certified lifeguards. It was a tremendous party. The food and the drink flowed freely. Everyone was thrilled at the accomplishment of the summer. But it was not until the party was nearly over that somebody noticed a fully-clothed man at the bottom of the pool near the drain. They attempted to revive the man, but it was too late. This man had drowned surrounded by lifeguards who were celebrating their success.8

I praise God for the record level of Cooperative Program giving. We ought to be grateful for the all-time high that we have in membership, churches, missionaries. I thank God for seminaries that are now led by Bible-believing inerrantists. But let us not get so caught up in back slapping we forget there is a nation of lost people drowning in a pool of sin with no hope without Jesus Christ.

In 1929, when the Soviet government decided they wanted to wipe out the church, do you know what they did? They passed a law. They did not pass a law to close the Orthodox church buildings. They did not pass a law saying they couldn't worship on Sunday morning. Here is what they did. They made it a crime to conduct church schools. They made it a crime to help the poor. They made it a crime to go into the neighborhoods and reach out to people. They said, "All you have to do is simply stay within your church on Sunday morning and you can meet as much as you want to."9

Well, what the Soviet Communists did to the church by decree in 1929, we are doing to ourselves by default in 1998.

Salvation should ignite us, and I will tell you something else. Jude said that salvation should unite us. Notice what he says again in verse 3, "I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation." Southern Baptists,

together. Salvation is what binds us together. Salvation is what builds us together. Salvation is what blesses us together.

I want to say again, I thank God for the Cooperative Program. It is a genius of missionary cooperation for which every Southern Baptist

which I could not have done with-

Cooperative Program is not the basis of our unity! It is the result and an expression of our unity. The basis of Baptist unity must always be the Word of God, the cross of Christ, and salvation by grace through faith.

Jude said we must not only be diligent extenders of the faith, We must be devoted contenders for the faith.

This letter originally was written to be an encouragement to declare the faith, but it became an exhortation to defend the faith. Why was Jude so concerned that we contend earnestly for the faith? Notice what kind of faith it is. First, it is a definite faith. Notice, he says we are to contend earnestly for the faith. There is a difference between faith and the faith. One refers to the operation of faith. The other refers to the object of faith. One refers to how we believe. The other refers to what we believe. You see, there are many churches and there are many denominations, but there is only one faith. And this faith is the truth

of the Word of God. In other words, what Jude said was there is a body of belief; there is a deposit of doctrine that is non-negotiable.

I realize that the term fundamentalism has fallen into disrepute and disfavor. It's another term that has been hijacked by those who would discredit people who simply love God and believe the Bible. Hear me plainly, there is such as a thing as the fundamentals of the faith. And I say today that the infallibility of Scripture, the deity of Christ, His virgin birth, substitutionary death, physical resurrection, and literal return are nonnegotiables that are not up for debate and are not

Not only is it a definite faith; it is a dogmatic faith. But notice what Jude says, "I want you to contend earnestly for the faith which was" - now underscore the next three words — "once for all delivered to the saints."

My brothers and sisters, there is a great doctrine that we need to resurrect in those words once for all. That's one Greek word in the text and that same Greek word is used in Hebrews 9:28, where the Word of God says that Christ was offered once for all to bear the sins of many. Let me make it plain. We don't need another son of God dying on a cross, and we don't need another word from God printed in a book.

We hear a lot about the inerrancy of Scripture. We don't hear enough about the sufficiency of Scripture. Just as the incarnate Word of God is sufficient for salvation, the inscripturated Word of God is sufficient for revelation.

Let me make it very plain. Between the covers of this Book I hold in my hand, we have on every subject the Bible addresses the only words from God we need. On every issue pertaining to God, there is nothing else we need to know. The Scripture says it all. There may be things that we want to know, but there is nothing else we need to know and nothing else we can know this side of heaven except what we find in the Word of God.

If it is not plain enough, let me make it plain in this sentence. When revelation ended, so did inspiration. The Bible is the only word we have from God. It is the only word we need from God. We don't need inspirations for new truth. What we need is more illumination for the old truth. We have what God wants us to have. I tell you today, there is more truth in this Book than could be dug out by a million shovels, ciphered out by a billion computers, or figured out by a trillion theologians. Between Moses and Matthew, Malachi and Mark, Lamentations and Luke, Jeremiah and John, Amos and Acts, Proverbs and Paul, we have God's complete once for all revelation.

Therefore, we don't need Joseph Smith, Mary Baker Eddy, Ellen White, Golden Tablets, dreams and visions, or another testament. All we need is what we have, which is the inspired, infallible Word of God.

Listen to me. John 3:16 alone is worth more than a million Golden Tablets, a billion human experiences, and a trillion mystical visions put together. So I just want to ask anyone of any faith or any religion who is looking for spiritual truth beyond this Book one question: Why wade in the muddy waters of human speculation when you can swim in the clean ocean of divine revelation?

Get this next concept down and don't forget it. Inspiration is confined to the Bible. Experience must be confirmed by the Bible. Doctrine must be conformed to the Bible. If any group extends inspiration beyond this Bible, elevates experience over this Bible, or edifies doctrine against this Bible, let that group be anathema.

It is a definite faith. It is a dogmatic faith. It is a delivered faith. He says, "I want you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered." Preachers, listen to me. That Greek word for delivered is a word that means "to be entrusted with." It means "to be deposited with." We are like a bank. God has invested in us the truth of His Word. In other words, we are stewards of this faith. We have not only been called to be stewards of the tithe; we have been called to be stewards of the truth.

This faith was not discovered by the saints. It

was delivered to the saints, and we are going to be held accountable as to how we preserved it, how we protected it, and how we preached it. And that's why Jude says, "We must contend earnestly."

The Greek word there for contend is a word that gives us the English word "agonize." It refers to an athlete struggling for victory in a wrestling match. In other words, Jude said when others deny the faith, we are not to shy away from defending the faith. Preachers, Christianity is not a playground for sissies, it is a battleground for soldiers, and it is right to fight when you fight for right.

Almost 100 years ago at the turn of the century, James F. Love, who was the executive secretary of the Southern Baptist Convention Foreign Mission Board from 1914 to 1928, said, "The man who died, rather than surrender one star in his country's flag is called a hero, and a monument is built to his memory. But the man who refuses to surrender some things in the Bible God has given him is called a narrow-hearted bigot. And he who smilingly said 'All right. It doesn't make any difference' is praised for his liberality and goodness. They count it a mark of superior piety to be willing, in order to agree with men, to give up a part of God's Bible and sanction what it does not teach, ..." then Dr. Love concluded, "... whereas it is criminal, cowardice, and no piety at all."10

Southern Baptists, let us say as we begin to enter a new millennium, we are not going to give up one inch of the territory of truth found in this Book. We are not going to surrender one jot or one tittle for denominational peace, institutional loyalty, or ecumenical progress.

Jude said we must be devoted contenders for the faith, then gives a third exhortation. Not only must we be diligent extenders of the faith. Not only must we be devoted contenders of the faith.

We must be determined defenders of the faith. You can never relax your radar. There will always be those who attack the faith and they will do it in incredibly insidious fashion.

Let me tell you how to recognize the people he is talking about in verse 4. They will always have these three characteristics. You can mark

If possible, they will deceive the saints. We learn the reason why Jude was so concerned and why he changed the subject on what he was originally going to write in verse 4. Listen to what he says. "For certain men have crept in unnoticed." That word for crept is a very picturesque word in the Greek language. It refers to a criminal who has been exiled to a foreign land but slips back across the border under the cover of darkness. It's the picture of a crocodile who can slip into the water without making a ripple.

Let me make it plain. What Jude is saying is this: You had better beware. There are spiritual crocodiles that line the banks of the river of Christianity. They are always waiting to slip in and devour colleges and devour seminaries and devour churches and devour denominations. To use modern-day terminology, there are stealth liberals who fly in under spiritual radar so they can take over and steal that which has been built by the blood of Bible-believing conservatives.

The media in recent days has given a lot of press to the Jesus Seminar. This is a group of seventy scholars, and I use that term lightly. Working over a period of six years, they went through the Gospels. They wanted to decide what Jesus said and what He didn't say, what He did do and what He didn't do. These so-called scholars determined that fully 82 percent of what Jesus reportedly said in the Gospels He really didn't say. And much of the remaining 18 percent is in doubt.

They determined that Jesus definitely did not predict His death on the cross. He did not predict His return to earth in a second coming. They deny as myth the virgin birth, the resurrection, and every single miracle in the Gospels. You say, "James, how did they come to that conclusion?" They used a tremendous scholarly method. Every scholar was given beads of four different colors. If a scholar thought Jesus said something, he cast a

red bead. If he wasn't quite sure, he cast a pink bead. If He didn't say it but it represented something He may have thought, he cast a gray bead. If He definitely did not say it or would not even have thought it, he cast a black bead. And they have now published their own version of the Gospels entitled The Five Gospels: Color Coding Every Saying Attributed to Jesus.

When a denomination prepare for this final exam. And all begins to debate what the final exam, they arrived at the auditorium. The bell rang. The pro-

God has already declared,

that denomination is doomed to die and that denomination deserves to die!

Well, my friend, I have only one thing to say about these so-called scholars and their methodology. The Bible isn't running for election and they don't get a vote!

These "scholars" remind me of a football player I read about at the University of California at Berkeley. He took a course entitled "A Survey of the New Testament." It was one of the most popular courses in the school. It was filled every semester because the professor never gave homework. There were no test papers. There were no books to read. There were no notes to take. The entire grade for the course depended on a final exam. And for over twenty years, that final exam consisted of one question and it was always the same question: "Discuss the missionary journeys of the apostle Paul." Well, everyone in the class figured out that all they had to do was trace the journeys of Paul and explain his ministry and they would get an "A." Well, this football player was not the brightest guy in class, so he asked a

buddy of his if he would help him semester long, all they did was study the journeys of Paul. On the day of

fessor began to distribute the question. Everybody thought that was kind of stupid because they said, "We already

know what the question is," or so they thought. Because for the first time in over twenty years, the professor had changed the question. The question was not: "Discuss the missionary journeys of Paul." The question was: "Criticize the Sermon on the Mount." Well, the entire class was first shocked, then frustrated, and then absolutely livid. And everybody was sitting there glaring, with their hands folded, except the football player. Everybody noticed that football player was writing as fast and as furiously as he could go. One by one the rest of the students simply took their examination booklets, walked up to the desk, threw them down with disgust, and stormed out of the room. But the football player, with sweat pouring off his brow, was writing as

Finally, the bell rang and the professor said, "Son, time is up. I need your examination." He walked up, laid it on the professor's desk and walked out of the room. The next day when the class gathered together, on the desk of that professor were two stacks of books. One stack all

hard as he could.

"F's;" and the book of the football player that had "A+." They could not believe it. They couldn't wait until they surrounded that football player to see what he had written. Here was his answer: "Who am I to criticize the Sermon on the Mount? What I want to do is discuss the missionary journeys of Paul." (Applause)

I want to raise the same question. Who are these so-called biblical scholars who dare to criticize the Bible? You don't criticize the Bible. The Bible criticizes you. And, my friend, I want to tell you something. This Book will still be standing long after their cold, dead ashes are moldering in

You learn something about biblical scholarship. True biblical scholarship never brings disdain to the Word of God. It never brings disgrace to the Son of God. And it never brings disbelief to the church of God, and if it does it is neither biblical nor scholarship.

What do they do? First of all, they ... I'm just so overcome, so burdened. They distort the Scriptures. Now, look what he says in verse 4. Jude goes on to describe these men as, "ungodly men who turn the grace of our God into lewd-

In other words, they will defend homosexuality, adultery, fornication, and a host of other sins in the name of the grace of God and the love of God. These religious charlatans who hide behind clerical collars, religious robes, seminary degrees, preach a heaven without hell, love without wrath, mercy without judgment, salvation without a

What they do is to put the grace of God in a showcase and the judgment of God in a suitcase. Well, I have news for you. The Word of God teaches that God's grace is not the license to sin; it is the liberty not to sin. And it is still true; God unequivocally loves the sinner, but He absolutely hates the sin.

Southern Baptists, hear me today. A denomination is known as much for what it does not debate as what it does debate. Let us never debate what God has already decided. When a denomination begins to debate what God has already declared, that denomination is doomed to die and that denomination deserves to die!

They distort the Scriptures. They deceive the saints. And, finally, they deny the Savior. Notice what we read in verse 4. "These men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turned the grace of our God into lewdness", now, watch this, "and denied the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ." If you studied that in the Greek language, you will find that both the word "God" and the word "Lord" refer to Jesus Christ. What he really said was they deny our only Lord and God, Jesus Christ. It is one of the strongest affirmations of the deity of Christ found in all of the

What do we hear today? We hear today that Jesus is good but He is not God. He is dynamic but He is not divine. He is one way among many, but He is not the one and only way to God. Well, no matter what a preacher behind a pulpit says, no matter what a professor behind a podium teaches, listen to me, if they are wrong about Jesus, it doesn't matter what else they are right about. Get it down. Get it plain. Get it straight. Jesus Christ is God!

So Southern Baptists, let us make up our minds now and forever that we will never sell our theological birthright for a mess of politically correct pottage that calls for a toleration of that which is sinful, a compromise with that which is carnal, and an acceptance of that which is immoral. As we enter a new millennium, let Southern Baptists rise up and say, without stammer, without stutter, without hesitation or equivocation: If the whole world ridicules the Bible as antiquated myth, we will preach it as the infallible Word of God!

If the whole world is pro-abortion and proeuthanasia, we will defend the right to life for both the born and the unborn and be unashamedly pro-life. If the whole world glorifies homosexuality, we will call it sexual perversion and moral sin. If the whole world promotes adultery and fornication, we will declare that sex is to be reserved for marriage, and marriage is to be reserved for a man and a woman. If the whole world preaches a universal salvation and condemns the cross, we will not be ashamed of the gospel of Christ, and we will shout from every rooftop that Jesus saves and He alone is the way, the truth, and the life for both the Jew and the Gentile. If the whole world propagates the dogma of naturalistic evolution, we will stand by Genesis 1:1 "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."

And if the whole world scoffs at the unique identity of Jesus Christ, we will proclaim with our dying breath the virgin birth, vicarious death, victorious resurrection, and visible return of Him to whom one day every knee shall bow and every tongue confess as Lord to the glory of God the Father! (Applause)

It was June, 1940. Winston Churchill had been prime minister of England for one month. Hitler was moving across Europe at will. Nation after nation was falling before his war machine. Everybody was wondering, "If France is defeated, will Britain also throw in the towel?" Well, to counteract any such notion, Winston Churchill took to the airways over BBC Radio and he made this statement: "Upon this battle depends the survival of Christian civilization. Upon it depends our own British life and a long continuity of our institutions and our empire. Hitler knows that he will have to break us on this island or lose the war. If we can stand up to him, all Europe may be free and the life of the world may move forward in the broad sunlit uplands.

"But if we fail, then the whole world, including the United States, including all we have known and cared for, will sink into the abyss of a new dark age, made more sinister and perhaps more protracted by the lights of perverted science." And then he closed with this statement that still sticks like glue to my heart fifty-eight years later. "Let us, therefore, brace ourselves to our duties and so bear ourselves that if the British Empire and its commonwealth last for 1,000 years, men will say 'That was their finest hour."11

Almost twenty years ago, the Southern Baptist Convention saw how denomination after denomination had been mowed under by the machinery of higher criticism and spiritual liberalism, and took a stand and said "We will not go the way of other denominations." A battle was fought, a war was waged, blood was spilled, but we took our stand. And if the Lord tarries for another millennium and there is still a Southern Baptist Convention, may our descendants look back at those last twenty years and say, "That was our finest hour."

And so, my fellow Southern Baptists, until Jesus comes, let us stay lashed to the old rugged cross. Let us stay anchored to the old-fashioned gospel. Let us stay chained to the old-fashioned faith once for all delivered to the saints. And if there is a group called Southern Baptists 1,000 years from now, when they look back at us, their spiritual ancestors, and they see why we stood for truth - and where we stood - on this Book - may they declare to a world that will still need Jesus, that, "Just as they stood, here we stand now and forever." God bless you. (Applause)

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