

**Ken Whitten's Convention Message
2005 Southern Baptist Convention
June 22, 2005, Nashville, Tennessee**

THE PRESERVATION OF A DENOMINATION

ACTS 27:9-44 (NKJV)

Dr. Ken Whitten

I want to speak to you this morning on *The Preservation of a Denomination*.

They tell us that on the night of April 14, 1912, at 11:40 p.m., the greatest maritime disaster in history began to unfold. The great *Titanic*, a ship that took 12,000 men more than two years to construct, the pride of the White Star Fleet and of the United States, was approaching an iceberg when First Officer Murdoch ordered the engines stopped, then reversed, at the same time he yelled, "Hard-a-Starboard." This action caused the *Titanic* to turn to port. The iceberg glanced the side of the ship, causing her plates to buckle and rivets below the waterline to pop 300 feet in length. The ship was called "unsinkable" – actually the exact words were "practically unsinkable," (1) and as you and I know – the unsinkable did the unthinkable – and while only 705 passengers and crew were rescued by the ship *Carpathia*, over 1,500 souls went to an icy grave that night.

The amazing thing is that no ship ever gave her passengers more confidence – no ship ever made her passengers feel more secure. All seemed well as the *Titanic* sailed through the blue waters of the North Atlantic. We know today why that ship sank. They used a technology whereby the hull of the ship was divided into compartments rather than it being just one integrated, unified hull. The idea was that a few of the compartments could be damaged, even flooded, and still the ship would continue to float.

Here's the point: When the integrity of the hull was damaged, the ship was doomed.

James Cameron, the producer of the film *Titanic*, said one of the reasons he produced the movie was because the *Titanic* is a metaphor of life. "We're all on the *Titanic*," he said. (2)

Listen to me: When an individual, a family, a church, an institution, or a denomination tries to compartmentalize, you'll capsize. You can't say, "What I do in my home – what I do in my school – what I do in my work – what I do in my church – are not related."

Webster's on-line definition of integrity: "Integrity is the quality or state of being complete, undivided, incorruptible."

It's a lack of integrity to say what I am in my home doesn't have to measure up to what I am in my pulpit. What I say in my church and what I see on my computer do not have to relate to each other. "I'll just compartmentalize my life" – because, my friend, the day you start doing that, you've compromised, you've compartmentalized – and what may look like smooth sailing is just a matter of time when an iceberg below the waterline sinks your ship.

Let me tell you – before the body of the ship capsizes, the soul of the ship will always feel its effects, because God wired every man with a conscience.

That's why the apostle Paul told young preacher Timothy in 1 Timothy 1:19 to "have faith and a good conscience," because some have rejected both and "many," he said, "have made a shipwreck of their faith."

Southern Baptists have always had a conscience, and this ship has sailed the bloody seas at times over convictions worth dying for. Some have called it The Conservative Resurgence. It's been labeled a hostile takeover, but history will be real clear at the end of the day. It was never about power – never about politics – never about personalities and position.

It's all been about integrity. It's about keeping a ship afloat that didn't say: We teach one thing in our seminaries; we publish one thing in our publications; and we preach something else from our pulpits. Southern Baptists have always known that the tongue in your mouth and the tongue in your shoe have to go in the same direction. Because if you don't walk your walk and talk your talk, you'll make a titanic mistake.

The difference years ago with the *Titanic* and our denominational ship was the damage was at the top, not the bottom.

Compromising God's Word was not one of our options. Even if a committee put together for the purpose of peace asked them to compromise, Dr. Adrian Rogers made it real clear what he felt.

(Video – Dr. Adrian Rogers)

According to Dr. Jerry Sutton in his book *The Baptist Reformation*, and Judge Paul Pressler in his book *A Hill on Which to Die*, it seems as early as 1959, Scripture was being taught in our seminaries as not being authoritative and not valid in its historicity and authenticity.

It was the 1960 Convention when our president, Dr. Ramsey Pollard, in his Convention message, said, "If you don't believe the miracles and the Word of God, get out of our seminaries. I'm not saying that because I'm smart. I'm not saying that because it's trite. I am saying it because Southern Baptists need to be on guard against false teachers in our ranks..." (3) He went on to say, "Your academic freedom stops at a certain point." (3)

Earlier that year, T. A. Patterson wrote in his column, *A Pastor Answers* – "Always the Scripture must be recognized as the final source of authority. If a man rejects any portion of revelation because he thinks it does not accord with reason, or conscience, or experience, he plays havoc with the entire Bible." (4)

When Broadman Press published Ralph Elliott's book *The Message of Genesis* in 1961, which worked from an historical-critical method of interpretation that divorced the message of the Bible from literal history, it was the same song, second verse, which postulated essentially the same understanding of the nature of Scripture as C. H. Toy eighty years before. Folks, the inerrancy issue is as new as the common cold. That wasn't Southern Baptists' problem – our problem was integrity.

You can believe what you want when you want, and teach where you want, but at the moment you become out of step with the core convictions of your Convention, you've compartmentalized, you've compromised. And Southern Baptists knew there was only one thing left to do on this denominational ship, and that was to capsize.

(Video – Dr. W. A. Criswell)

In his 1992 book, *The Genesis Controversy*, Ralph Elliott reflected on this episode in his life and commented on what he called "double-speak."

"Double-speak has become an insidious disease within Southern Baptist life. Through the years, the program at Southern Seminary has acquainted students with the best in current research in the given fields of study. Often, however, this was done with an eye and ear for the 'gallery' and how much the 'church trade' would bear. Professors and students learned to couch their beliefs in acceptable terminology and in holy jargon so that although thinking one thing, the speaker calculated so as to

cause the hearer to affirm something else. When I taught at Southern Seminary years ago, we often said to one professor who was particularly gifted at this double-speak game, that if the Southern Baptist Convention should split, he would be the first speaker at both new conventions.

One of the serious difficulties for me personally during the Genesis Controversy was a running debate with a particular Southern professor who counseled me to use the double-speak technique. When the difficulties came, he said he believed the same thing on these issues but I got into trouble and he did not because I did not know how to communicate. What he meant was that I did not know how to double-speak." (5)

Call it double-speak if you will, but the preservation of a denomination began because some were not willing to call it double-speak, but a lack of integrity. We were divided. They weren't willing to compromise – weren't willing to compartmentalize – weren't willing to capsize. Something had to be done, or we were headed for a storm.

Let me tell you what's on my heart today. The question in this decade is not: Do we believe in the inerrancy of God's Word? The test to this generation of preachers and theologians is: Do we believe in the sufficiency of God's Word? The question is not: Do we believe God's Word is inerrant and infallible? The real question is: Do we have the integrity to believe God's Word is relevant and believable?

The issue is no longer scholarship, but relationship; not authorship, but fellowship and stewardship. We're not asked to bail water out of a sinking ship. Our great Captain is asking the question in this generation as it relates to our denominational fellowship: "Will you leave a ship in the waters of worldliness unmanned, or will you reach the shore with the souls I have entrusted to you and rescue those in sinking waters doomed to perish?" That's the question, my friend.

The anthem is not only "I'm on the Battlefield for My Lord," but "Rescue the Perishing, Care for the Dying." That's the song and the question for this generation. And it was the question for the apostle Paul in Acts chapter 27.

James Cameron was right: All of us are on a voyage. What's true about the preservation of a denomination is true about a church, a home, and a life.

One of the debates regarding the *Titanic* is that on April 14, 1912, at 11:35 p.m., there were three warnings sent from the crow's nest that ice had been spotted. The first two messages were ignored. Finally, the officer picked up the phone, but it was too late.

Dr. Luke fires four warnings for our lives today. He tells us where the ice pockets are and how to avoid them. Look with me at his first warning:

I. DOUBTING

Paul was an expert in the sea. He knew a little about shipwrecks. In 2 Corinthians 11:25-26, he told the church at Corinth he had been shipwrecked three times and in perils of the water often. He knew from mid-September to mid-November it was too dangerous to sail. He doesn't get a choice – he's a prisoner, and they are headed to Rome. But they're also headed for a storm. Do you know why? They doubted the Word of God and the voice of excellence and were silenced by the voice of expedience. Convenience and consensus won over counsel and convictions.

Paul's battle and burden wasn't over cargo and ships. He was battling over souls and Scripture. It was a battle of truth and trust. This resurgence has never been over buildings and property. It's always been about truth and treasure of souls.

They found themselves in a storm, and you and I will, too; when we listen to counsel, consensus, and convenience – instead of convictions. In the words of John Phillips, "The voice of the humble believer in touch with God is ignored. Darwin is given precedence over Moses; scientists preferred before the saints, and all are losers."

Isn't that what Dr. Jerry Vines warned us about in 1990 in his presidential address in New Orleans?

(Video – Dr. Jerry Vines)

The first step in the sinking of a denominational fellowship is doubting. Did you hear the warning – shot off that crow's nest?

Here comes the second warning. It's the warning of...

II. DRIFTING (vv. 14-15)

The first thing storms tend to do in our lives is cause us to drift. This is where we let go of our goals. We forget where we're headed – we even forget our core values.

The Bible says in verses 14-15, "But not long after a tempestuous head wind arose, called Euroclydon. So when the ship was caught and could not head into the wind, we let her drive."

That's a picture of many people's lives today. Their lives are driven by the wind. Could be a picture of many pastors today... just drifting along, tossed back and forth, no compass, no direction, mostly darkness. Driven by the wind of culture, rather than the Word. Going from this conference to the next conference looking for what "works." Listen, just because it works doesn't mean it's right. There's a difference between church growth and church health. Cancer grows...

The strong currents of life sweep you back and forth, and you just want to say, "What's the use? Why fight it? I'll go with the flow. Why make the effort – my marriage is useless, my ministry is directionless."

And when that happens, the third warning goes off.

III. DISCARDING (vv. 18-19)

The Bible says they lightened the ship. Then the third day they threw the ship's tackle overboard. That's what happens in a storm. First the cargo, then the ship's tackle, then the food. Then later you discover they throw themselves off the ship.

The point is this: Often when we get into a crisis, we are tempted to throw out the very things that are important to us. We discard our values, our convictions. We become impulsive. We do two things: We lighten the ship, and then we leave the ship. We discard it all. We feel like giving up. It's a typical reaction. We doubt – then we drift – then we discard.

The cargo is what is given to us – entrusted to us. The tackle is what guides us – and the food is what is good for us. And overboard it goes!

As a pastor, I've seen it in churches – drop out of choir – away from church – quit soul-winning – going on mission trips – quit their Sunday School class – quit teaching, singing, ministering. Give up their faith – give up their friends – give up the food. They quit reading God's Word. They've made a shipwreck of their faith.

I've seen it in denominations. Too important and too busy to attend the associational meetings. Stop fellowshipping with your fellow pastors. Get out there on an island by yourself. You stop recommending Southern Baptist schools like Southern, Southeastern, Midwestern, New Orleans,

Southwestern, Golden Gate, and Mid-America, Criswell, Boyce, Liberty, and Greenville Baptist College, and I'll stop here because I may leave out one of our fine Baptist schools. Don't go to your state conventions. Don't bring messengers to the Southern Baptist Convention anymore – stopped that – too much bureaucracy. Left the innercity for someone else to reach.

Then the last warning goes off...

IV. DESPAIRING (vv. 20)

Luke says in Acts 27:20, "Now when neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small tempest beat on us, all hope that we would be saved was finally given up."

The last thing you throw out when you're in a storm is hope. That's the last thing that goes – in a denomination, church, family, or individual.

These are dreadful days followed by appalling nights. There's a sense of fear and panic and despairing everywhere you turn, and just like Paul's ship, it seems even the experts are speechless and no one knows what to do. Did I say, "No one?"

Let me tell you – standing in the wings is a man who is 180 degree turnabout from the way the sailor responded to this crisis. They are panic-stricken, in despair, and hopeless. The apostle Paul is calm, confident, and courageous. Know why?

He has the Word of God. Someone said, "There are three types of people in the world. Those who are afraid, those who don't know enough to be afraid, and those who know their Bible." Character is not made in a crisis – it is revealed in a crisis. Paul is a man of integrity, a man of character. He believes God's Word is not only inerrant, but sufficient. He does something that not only families and individuals can do, but churches and denominations can do. In fact, it's precisely what Southern Baptists have done. You say, "Bro. Ken, what did he do?" He threw out four anchors (v. 29).

A. GOD'S PRESENCE (v. 23)

Paul said, "For there stood by me this night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve."

Listen to me, and may you never forget it – Storms can't hide from the face of God. Look down the annals of history in Southern Baptist life, you'll see God has used Southern Baptists to shake the world for Christ – and taught God's people this truth: When you're in a storm, throw out the anchor of His presence.

Do you know who's been our anchor of His presence? Jack Taylor, Max Barnett, Avery Willis. God has used people like Bertha Smith, Manley Beasley, Peter Lord (2959 Plan), Ron Dunn, T. W. Hunt, John Franklin, Don Miller, and more recently, Dr. Henry Blackaby, *Experiencing God*. Those were anchors in Southern Baptist life, and we are forever indebted to them.

Paul and Southern Baptists threw out another anchor...

B. GOD'S PURPOSE (v. 24)

Luke says in v. 24, "Do not be afraid, Paul, you must be brought before Caesar..." Storms not only cannot hide God's face from you, they can't change God's future about you either.

When God says, "I have a plan and a purpose for you," man can't thwart that. As a believer and as a denomination, we ought to have a sense of destiny. Storms are simply temporary

setbacks to that purpose. God has a plan and a purpose for our denomination. Please don't tell me we are finished yet. These can be the greatest days of reaching people we've ever seen. Whether you talk about M.E. Dodd or George W. Truett, they were among many who threw out an anchor of purpose. In recent days God has used one man to help people find God's purpose for their life more with one book than all the volumes written. No one is more surprised to be used than our own Dr. Rick Warren.

Paul threw out a third anchor...

C. GOD'S PROMISES (v. 25)

"Therefore take heart, men, for I believe God that it will be just as it was told me."

Storms can't hide you from the face of God – can't change the future of God – and they can't destroy the facts about God.

Listen, the Promiser is more important than the promise. Some of you today are going through a devastating storm right now.

You may lose the boat, you may lose the cargo, you may lose the tackle of the ship – you may even get wet, but you're going to make it. Why? Because of the promises of God. Someone said, "God said it. I believe it. That settles it!" Listen, God said it – that settles it whether you believe it or not!

What do you do while you're waiting on God's promises? You do what these people did. You anchor yourself to God's truth, and you pray for daylight.

Have Southern Baptists thrown out God's anchor of promise? Many times! When Ginny and I attended our very first Southern Baptist Convention in Houston, Texas, on June 10, 1979, we heard Dr. W. A. Criswell at the Pastors' Conference say, "We will have a great time here if for no other reason than to elect Adrian Rogers as our Convention President." The place erupted. He didn't even know he was running – because he wasn't – except from the position.

And since then we have elected Bailey Smith, Jimmy Draper, Charles Stanley, Adrian Rogers (again), Jerry Vines, Morris Chapman, Ed Young, Jim Henry, Tom Elliff, Paige Patterson, James Merritt, Jack Graham, and Bobby Welch, who are men who hold to the infallibility, the inerrancy, and the full plenary Word of God. We threw out another anchor of promise.

(Video – Seminary Presidents Signing the Covenant)

And if you attended the Southern Baptist Convention in Dallas in 1997, you'll remember the historic evening when six Southern Baptist seminary presidents – William Crews, Charles Kelley, Albert Mohler, Mark Coppenger, Paige Patterson, and Ken Hemphill – signed a covenant between our seminaries and our churches entitled "A Covenant of Commitment."

Southern Baptists owe a debt of gratitude to these men and men like Judge Paul Pressler, Homer Lindsay Sr. and Jr., Bill Powell, T. A. Patterson, Joe Odle, W. A. Criswell, Freddie Gage, Bob Sorrell, Tim Hedquist, Gray Allison, T. C. Pinkney, Stan Coffey, Harold O'Chester, Damon Shook, John Morgan, Joe Boatright, Ed Johnson, John Sullivan, Bob Parker, Danny Akin, Fred Wolfe, Ronnie Floyd, Johnny Hunt, Ted Traylor, Danny Waters, Gene Mims, Roland Maddox, Richard Land, O.S. Hawkins, Bob Reccord,

Jim Richards, our past and present Convention presidents, and a host of unnamed foot soldiers who will never get their names mentioned from a platform, but their names are written down in glory and will be read to the angels and the multitudes in heaven. And because of these, today we have people like Jerry Falwell, David Jeremiah, Tim and Bev Lahaye, and Matt Staver throwing out the anchor of God's promises to this world.

They threw out one more anchor. The anchor of...

D. GOD'S PROVISION

If storms can't hide you from the face of God, and they can't change the future of God, and they can't destroy the facts about God, there is one more thing storms cannot do. They can't alter the favor of God.

The ship did capsize, and the Bible says some swam to shore — verse 44 says, *"and the rest, some on boards, and some on parts of the ship. And so it was that they all escaped safely to land."*

They threw out one more anchor, and it was the anchor of God's favor. His provision for us when we're sinking in the depths of sin.

*I was sinking deep in sin, far from the peaceful shore,
Very deeply stained within, sinking to rise no more;
But the Master of the sea heard my despairing cry,
From the waters lifted me, now safe am I. (6)*

Have Southern Baptists thrown out a provision anchor? Sure have — the best in the business. Names like Vance Havner, Hyman Appleman, Clyde Chiles, Jess Henley, Stephen Olford (who died a Southern Baptist); and today, Junior Hill, Scott Dawson, Jay Strack, Jim Wilson, Gene Williams, Tim Williams, Sam Cathy, Bailey Smith, Franklin Graham, David Ring, Rick Scarborough, Rick Gage, John Bramlett, Bill Glass, Duane and Iris Blue, Jack Hazelwood, Keith Fordham. Oh, there's one more in our ranks who I believe may make it as an evangelist if he keeps on practicing — Dr. Billy Graham. And what about our 5,000 SBC international missionaries, and a host of preachers and music evangelists in our denomination (too many to name) — people like Larry McFadden — going to churches like Chitlin Switch Baptist Church, Prairie Baptist Church, Ezekiel Baptist Church, and First Baptist Church, Sunday after Sunday, going to prisons and schools, faithfully proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ.

God provided in the midst of their storm, some on boards, some on parts of the ship, but everyone reached the shore.

Illustration

On December 26, 2004, while we were sleeping, we had a worldwide disaster in the Indian Ocean. It registered nine on the Richter scale...its name, the tsunami earthquake. It was so cataclysmic, the island of Sumatra (which is the size of our state of California) actually shifted 50 feet. They tell me the earthquake actually changed the rotation of the earth. We know today that over a quarter of a million people perished, probably never having heard the gospel.

Eight areas were directly affected: Maldives, India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand, Indonesia, Aceh.

Eddie Cox, our IMB Prayer Coordinator, said when he arrived in Sri Lanka, three words came to his mind: heartbreak, help and hope.

Every newspaper and editorial in every nation was asking the question, "Why do bad things happen to good people?"

Cal Thomas wrote a classic editorial answering that question. He said that's not even the right question. The better question is: Why do good things happen to bad people? He then went on to rebuke one liberal priest who commented, "This makes me wonder if there is even a God." Cal Thomas said, "Shame on you liberal ministers. In a time when they need help and in a day when they need hope, shame on you!" (7)

Richard Niebuhr in his book, *The Kingdom of God in America*, said, "The liberal church has a god without wrath, who has brought men without sin, into a kingdom without judgment, through a Christ without a cross." (8)

"Shame on you liberals," Cal Thomas said.

Then the question has risen, "Where was God when all this happened?" But that's not the best question. The best question is not: Where was God when all this happened? The best question is: Where were we before all this happened?

Southern Baptists have been there — with workers, help, food and relief...over \$16 million given. We've been there during and after, but where were we before?

We think 250,000 people — how tragic!

1. Does it bother you that Africa has a tsunami called AIDS, and every two weeks approximately 250,000 people die?
2. Does it move you to think that since December 26, over one million in Asia alone have died without Christ?
3. What would you think if I told you approximately 2,000 people die every week in Zimbabwe of AIDS, and that there are over 60 million orphans in Africa because of AIDS? Does that do anything to you?
4. If you knew that in Indonesia every month over 300,000 people die without Christ, would that bother you?

When Jesus was asleep on the boat, the disciples looked at Him and said, "Master, carest not that we perish?" Do you hear the lost today?

Jeremiah 8:20: *"The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved."*

I love this denomination! The Southern Baptist Convention was born in the spirit of missions and evangelism. We may not all agree on literature; we may differ when it comes to styles of worship, and whether you have church on Sunday nights, and whether your pastor wears a tie or a Tommy Bahama shirt. You may even call Sunday School, Life Groups, Small Groups, or Bible Fellowship.

But, bless God! Can't we all agree God turned around a denomination, which is a collection of churches, to be salt and light and to rescue the perishing and care for the dying?

Illustration

When the *Titanic* sank on April 15, 1912, at 2:40 a.m., there were 325 first-class passengers, 285 second-class passengers, 706 third-class passengers, 898 crew members — all classes of people." (9)

- John Jacob Astor, worth \$150 million
- Major Archibald Butt, military aide to President Taft
- Benjamin Gugenheim — American Smelting & Refining Co. — worth \$95 million
- Isadore Strauss — famous clothing merchant — worth \$50 million
- Jay Bruce Ismay — owner of International Mercantile Marine Co. — worth \$40 million. (10)

Outside the White Star Offices in Liverpool, England, relatives and friends thronged the streets. Large boards displayed "Known to be Lost" and "Known to be Saved." When it was all said and done, there were only two classes of people: saved and lost.

Illustration

Let me tell you a story John Cameron didn't put in his movie, and one that is seldom told. John Harper was on his way to Chicago to preach a series of meetings. After the collision, he got his six-year old daughter, Nana, into a lifeboat, but apparently made no attempt to save himself. Instead he ran throughout the ship yelling, "Women, children, and unsaved into the lifeboats!"

Survivors reported that he began witnessing to anyone who would listen, and he continued to preach even after he had jumped into the water, clinging to a piece of wreckage.

Harper's final moments were recounted by a survivor four years after the disaster:

"I was drifting alone on a spar that night, when the tide brought Mr. Harper, also on a piece of wreckage, near me. Man, he said, are you saved? No, I said, I am not. He replied, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved.

"The waves bore him away, but strange to say brought him back a little later, and he said, Are you saved now? No, I said, I cannot honestly say that I am. He said again, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved. And shortly after he went down. There alone in the night, and with two miles of water under me, I believed. I am John Harper's last convert." (11)

If Fanny Crosby were standing here today, she'd say...

*Rescue the perishing, Care for the dying,
Snatch them in pity from sin and the grave;
Weep o'er the erring one, Lift up the fallen.
Tell them of Jesus the mighty to save.*

*Rescue the perishing, Care for the dying;
Jesus is merciful, Jesus will save.**

* Song "Rescue the Perishing" Words by Fanny Crosby (1969) Music: W. Howard Doane

Notes

Scripture references, Holy Bible, New King James Version, Broadman and Holman, 1996

- (1) *RMS Titanic, Inc.*, FAQ #12
 - (2) Paramount Pictures and 20th Century Fox, 1997
 - (3) Ramsey Pollard, Message preached at the Southern Baptist Convention, *Baptist Standard*, 8 June 1962: 8-9
 - (4) T.A. Patterson, "A Pastor Answers," *Baptist Standard*, 13 January 1950: 15
 - (5) Ralph H. Elliott, *The Genesis Controversy*, Macon; Mercer University Press, 1992: 33-34
 - (6) Song, "Love Lifted Me," James Rowe, tune by Howard E. Smith, 1912
 - (7) Cal Thomas, God & Suffering, Tribune Media Services, January 4, 2005
 - (8) Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, Wesleyan University Press, 1938
 - (9) *RMS Titanic, Inc.*, FAQ #3
 - (10) SermonSearch.com, Pastor Roger Griffith, "Titanic"
 - (11) *Titanic's Last Hero*, Moody Adams, Ambassador Press, 1997
- Also: Aguilla Webb, Encyclopedia, *Titanic* article

Part 3

Ministry Reports to the Southern Baptist Convention