

**NOW IS THE TIME TO LEAD**  
**President's Address To The Southern Baptist Convention**  
**Columbus, Ohio**  
**June 16, 2015**

On June 13, 1979, **Dr. Billy Graham** spoke to 48,000 Southern Baptists in Houston, Texas, and said, ***"God is not calling us tonight to a playground or a sports arena—He is calling us to a battleground."*** This was the public launching of *Bold Mission Thrust*, the vision to share the gospel with every person in the world by the year 2000. What Graham called a *"magnificent obsession"*, the retiring President of the Foreign Mission Board, **Dr. Baker James Cauthen** stated, ***"No matter what the costs, this worldwide mission thrust must be our priority."***

At this same convention, the 15,760 messengers elected Dr. Adrian Rogers as President of the Southern Baptist Convention. His election became the catalytic moment that launched us into the Conservative Resurgence. Only six years later in 1985 in Dallas, Texas, over 45,000 registered messengers gathered in the midst of the most intense battle for the Bible. Thirty years ago this summer, one of the highest moments in our history occurred on Monday night at the Pastors' Conference when **Dr. W. A. Criswell** preached the epic message, ***"Whether We Live Or Die."*** He proclaimed, as only he could, ***"Whether we continue to live, or ultimately die, lies in our dedication to the infallible Word of God."*** He went on to say in his concluding remarks, ***"No battle was ever won by retreat, or submission, or surrender."***

Historically, Southern Baptists have been willing to go to battle for two major things: The propagation of the gospel to the world and a perpetual commitment to the infallibility and inerrancy of the Bible. Even in 1922, when Southern Baptist President, **E. Y. Mullins** addressed our

convention, his opening sentence was, ***“Southern Baptists have come to one of our supreme hours in their history.”***

I believe if the fifty-nine Presidents who have preceded me could speak to us in this hour on June 16, 2015, in Columbus, Ohio, they would declare to us that we are living right now in our most defining hour as Southern Baptists. As Romans 13:11 tells us, this is a “kairos” moment, truly a decisive moment, an undeniable moment and season fixed by a Sovereign God as a true moment of destiny. We are not entering into a playground, but a battleground. *We are in spiritual warfare.*

This is not a time as Southern Baptists to shrink back in timidity and fearfulness or be paralyzed with uncertainty. This is not the time to retreat.

The alarm clock is going off in our nation and across the world. This is not the time to push the snooze button. Crises abound. The need is great. The hour is late. *Now is the time to lead.* With deep conviction and a great sense of urgency, I humbly come to you today and declare these words, appealing to you that...

**Title: *“NOW IS THE TIME TO LEAD”***

Leadership is missing in action today. Leaders are born in the midst of a crisis. Crises abound everywhere.

In the *New York Times*, Op-Ed Columnist Roger Cohen called the crisis we face the ***“Great Unraveling.”*** When the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, *David Cameron*, spoke to the United Nations about the threat of ISIS, *The Guardian* quoted him as saying, ***“We must not be so frozen with fear that we don’t do anything at all.”***

Sadly, we are seeing the savagery of ISIS advance, resulting in thousands of men, women, and children being beheaded, crucified, raped, or sold into the ever-growing human trafficking industry, while millions of others are being displaced from their homes. Simultaneously, we see American pastor, **Saeed Abedini** still imprisoned in Iran, which is absolutely wrong and unacceptable in every way. As well, the evil of Boko Haram and the ruthless persecution against Christians by some governments of the world are occurring. **Open Doors USA** says that the **"Persecution of Christians Reaches Historic Levels."** **Approximately 100 million Christians are being persecuted globally.** Perhaps **Wall Street Journal's** columnist **Peggy Noonan** is correct when she writes we are, **"adrift on denial."** **Now is the time to lead.**

**Dietrich Bonhoeffer** was right when he said: **"Silence in the face of evil is itself evil: God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act."**

**Now is the time to lead.** If this is not enough, across the world, 153 million orphans remain, one-seventh of the world lives in extreme poverty, 750 million people lack access to clean water, and natural disasters continue to occur. All of this while the global economy hangs in the balance. The world is not only dangerous, but also living without hope. **Now is the time to lead.**

Back at home in America, we are over \$18 trillion in debt and living on the edge financially. It is also reported that over 43 million Americans live in poverty. The decay of the family continues. Only 46% of the children in our nation are living in a home with two married heterosexual parents who are still in their first marriage.

Additionally, our hearts break at the sad state of racism and prejudice in our own nation. The **New York Times** reported **"Sixty-**

***one percent of Americans now say race relations in this country are generally bad.***” Tensions and conflict abound. I call upon all Christian leaders, Christ-followers, and churches, regardless of the color of their skin, to decry all racism and prejudice, denouncing it as sin against God and one another. *Now is the time to lead.*

Due to a 1973 ruling of the Supreme Court of the United States, in the last 42 years, our nation has aborted an estimated 57 million babies. Can you imagine, 57 million children losing their lives due to one Supreme Court decision? Even though reports state that abortion rates are down some, we do not need to become content in or calloused to this deplorable issue. ***How many is 57 million babies?*** 57 million babies is like destroying and taking the lives of the entire populations of ***California and New York.*** *Now is the time to lead.*

Now, we await the outcome of the next possible Supreme Court ruling that could alter not only our nation’s belief and practice on traditional and biblical marriage, but also our historic commitment to religious liberty for all people. This could be a watershed moment in our history, possibly changing the trajectory of our nation unlike anything we have seen since 1973, in the Roe vs. Wade decision. This decision could add more fuel to the already sweeping wildfire of the sexual revolution, and move it beyond anyone’s control locally, statewide, nationally, and globally. I say to you again: *Now is the time to lead.*

While all of these things are occurring nationally and globally, back at the church, many of our churches sleep. Most of our churches fight.

At times, the fellowship within our own Southern Baptist family is challenged due to a mindset that believes combat against one another is some valiant, spiritualized effort. We need to be careful not to chase after secondary matters that end up in the weeds of suspicion,

skepticism, criticism, and cynicism about one another. We need to refuse these carnal actions.

This is *not* leadership. In fact, it forfeits leadership. Pastors, Christian leaders, and all Christ-followers are not exempt from loving one another unconditionally and operating relationally by the biblical principles in Matthew 18. We need to love one another and all people just as Jesus loved all people. *Now is the time to lead.*

In short, anywhere you look there are crises. We live in a broken, fragmented, fragile, world. Our churches must rise to this moment, ministering in love and compassion to all people unconditionally. But with every crisis, there is an opportunity; there is an open door.

The final book of Holy Scripture is the Revelation of Jesus Christ. In chapters two and three, we read Jesus' words to seven different churches. Only two of these seven churches received commendation without any rebuke at all: One was Smyrna and the other was Philadelphia.

Philadelphia was a city known for two things: It was the Gateway to the East because it had the pass that would serve as the open path to cross the mountains of modern day Turkey. It was also subject to major earthquakes and repeated aftershocks.

The city was also filled with Jews, but once any Jew became a follower of Christ, they were ostracized and condemned by the synagogue. Followers of Jesus became opposed fiercely. Yet, in the midst of it all, God was Sovereign, Jesus was Lord, and doors were opened for the gospel.

***Revelation 3:7-8 says, "Write to the angel of the church in Philadelphia; 'The Holy One, the True One, the One who***

*has the key of David, who opens and no one will close, and closes and no one opens says: I know your works. Because you have limited strength, have kept My word, and have not denied My name, look, I have placed before you an open door that no one is able to close.'"*

The church at Philadelphia was marked by obedience to Christ. Even though they were small and seemingly insignificant, Jesus commended the church because their leadership and people were obedient to the commands of Christ and they endured steadfastly.

Pastor, it is not about the size of your church or your town, it is about your leadership and faithfulness to the commands of Christ.

Much like Philadelphia, our churches today are in increasingly hostile environments. We need to learn from the church at Philadelphia. We can do what God is calling us to do, even in the face of cultural opposition and in the midst of spiritual warfare.

*Now is the time to lead. From our text today, we learn . . .*

## **1. NOW IS THE TIME TO LEAD BELIEVING AND STANDING**

Jesus declares to the church in verse seven, "I have the Keys!" Keys are symbols of authority. As the true, holy, resurrected, Sovereign Lord, only Jesus has all-authority. Jesus reminds everyone that only He is the one true Savior who is the only door to salvation for the world. This is possible because of His declaration in *Revelation 1:18*, "***I hold the keys of death and Hades.***" The death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus gave Him complete authority over death itself, the grave, and even hell. We stand on the deep belief that Christ died for our sins, was buried, and raised on the third day. This is our hope for eternal life and is our message to the world.

This gospel serves as the keys to the Kingdom and they have been given to the church. This gospel, the keys, is Jesus' authority that opens doors for evangelism, ministry, and opportunities for gospel advancement.

In a world becoming darker by the moment, now is the time to lead believing and standing. The church at Philadelphia believed and stood. They were perceived by their culture as we are perceived by our culture: *Weak and limited in strength.*

Jesus told them in verse eight, "you have kept My word." This means they were holding fast to the Word of God. This church was faithful to believe in and stand on the commands of the Lord. Even through fierce opposition and spiritual warfare, they were faithful to keep God's Word. On this Word they stood.

Jesus also commends them for not denying His name. They did not retreat due to the intimidation from the Jewish synagogue, but they held fast to the name of Jesus. Because of this, they would be protected in future days and the doors of opportunity would be opened to them endlessly.

*Will we be faithful in this day of many adversaries and opponents to believe and stand on His Word and for Jesus' name? When other denominations and leaders are beginning to relax their message to be more politically correct, will we rise up in faithfulness to believe and stand on His Word and for Jesus' name? You cannot caress or cuddle with our culture and simultaneously believe and stand on God's Word and for Jesus' name.*

From this passage in Revelation, we know that when they were weak in their strength, they believed and stood faithfully for His Word

and for His name. *And when they did, Jesus said to them, "Look, I have placed before you an open door that no one is able to close."* When Jesus opens doors, no one and no power can shut the doors, including Satan and hell itself. The gates of hell cannot and will not prevail against the church.

Southern Baptists, when we realize our strength is limited without the power of God upon us and we believe and stand faithfully for His Word and for Jesus' name, doors will open for us like we have never seen before. Due to Jesus' sovereignty and power, there is not:

- \*One government*
- \*One Supreme Court*
- \*One court case*
- \*One editorial*
- \*One commentator*
- \*One liberal*
- \*One conservative*
- \*One world leader*
- \*One politician*
- \*One radical group*
- \*One demon*
- \*One of anything*

that can shut the doors Jesus Himself has opened for us. Jesus is not only the door to salvation, but He is the overseer of all doors. Stop seeing all the trends and events as obstacles for us and for the gospel; these are things that God will turn into open doors for the gospel.

In the New Testament, the open door represents great opportunities that God gives His people.

Southern Baptists, now is the time to lead. We need to believe and stand on His Word and for His name unashamedly and boldly, but always compassionately. We need to hold the Word of God in one hand and the love of God in the other hand. When we do this, the Lord will produce open doors, even when or if the opposition is fierce.

Therefore, I want to *remind* and *state clearly* to our churches, to our pastors and church leaders, to all evangelicals, to all believers globally, to everyone here in America, and to the entire world these things:

**Southern Baptists: We stand believing that the Bible is God's infallible, inerrant, authoritative and final Word in all things.**

*In our churches, we need to keep His Word, holding fast to His name. To all evangelicals, you can count on us. We will contend for the faith that was delivered to the saints, once and for all.*

**Southern Baptists: We stand believing that Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation; only coming through repentance from sin and faith in Christ alone.**

*While much of the world declares there are many paths to God; there is only one path to God, Christ alone. We are all sinners and only Jesus can forgive sin.*

**Southern Baptists: We stand believing that we are called to reach the world for Christ, making disciples of all the nations.**

*When we began 170 years ago in 1845, we united around this common cause and it will be the only thing that keeps us together: Propagating the Gospel to the ends of the earth.*

**Southern Baptists: We stand believing that our greatest need in America is to see the next Great Spiritual Awakening.**

*Last October in New York City, President Barack Obama stated, "[T]here's a sense possibly that the world is spinning so fast and nobody is able to control it." There is a growing desperation and admission from across America that we cannot fix ourselves! Our greatest hope for America is to see the church revived and the country experience a genuine spiritual awakening that will result in an outbreak of millions coming to faith in Christ. We need a Jesus revolution! It is time for Southern Baptists to lead by coming together in clear agreement, visible union, and in extraordinary prayer for the next Great Awakening and to reach the World for Christ.*

Tonight, our entire evening session will be dedicated to the purpose of thousands of us praying together for the next Great Awakening and for the world to be reached for Christ. Please be on time and stay with us all the way to the end on this historic night. Please do not assume it will be a normal session. While pre-worship begins at 6:30 PM, our formal beginning time is 6:45 PM.

*I state the following to remind us all, we believe God has created all people for the Glory of God and in His image.*

**America: We stand believing that humanity's bearing of God's image is not contingent upon one's skin color.**

*We believe that all racism and injustice must end, letting grace begin to unite us in the bond of peace. We must learn to love one another as Christ loves us. Since all people are made in God's image and created for His glory, our hearts break because of what I am about to state to you. .*

**America: We stand believing that abortion is a glaring desecration of the unborn child's purpose and value.**

*We must be vigilant to always stand for the unborn child, all human life, and human dignity from the womb to the tomb. Any decline in America's commitment to the unborn child will lead toward an accelerating desecration of human life, resulting in more abuse, more violence, and more chaotic disruption. God has created us to bring Him glory. When we devalue human life in any way from the womb to the tomb, we are robbing God of His intended glory for each of us.*

*Regardless of what someone has done or is involved in today, our churches must rise up right where the people are, from the abortion issue to the same-sex issue, and many others, extending God's love, ministering to them, and sharing the power of God's healing and forgiveness.*

*With this desire, my heart breaks to even have to state the following thing. Before I do, I want to be more than clear. We love all people and even if they are struggling with same sex attraction or adultery or anything else, we want to help them. We are all sinners and in need of the Lord's help and grace.*

Even though this is my heart, I must also lift up what God says in His Word. Therefore, I humbly declare this in love to all people and to the leaders of our nation, our Supreme Court, and to all of America and the world . . .

**America: We stand believing that marriage is the uniting of one man and one woman in covenant commitment for a lifetime.**

*We have believed this and do believe this and I believe will continue to believe this as a convention of churches. We stand for biblical and traditional marriage. As Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy said, "This definition (of traditional marriage) has been with us for millennia. And it's very difficult for the court to say, 'Oh well, we know better.'" We could not agree more with those words. We do not need to redefine what God has defined already. This is a Bonhoeffer moment for every pastor in America.*

While some evangelicals may be bowing down to the deception of the inclusiveness of same sex union or marriage in their churches, we will not bow down, nor will we be silent. We believe the Scripture is authoritative in all things and to say it permits such activity is a denial of its authenticity, infallibility, and authority regarding marriage and everything else. Therefore, we will hold up and lift up the Bible as God's authoritative truth on marriage. This afternoon, you will be asked to approve a resolution that affirms what we believe about marriage and calls us to stand for truth; but it also reminds us to love our neighbors and extend respect to all people, even those who disagree with us on this pivotal issue.

While we affirm our love for all people, including those struggling with same-sex attraction, we cannot and will not affirm any behavior that deviates from God's design for marriage. Our first commitment is to God and His Word, nothing else, and no one else.

*The Supreme Court is NOT the final authority nor is the culture itself; but the Bible is God's Final Authority about marriage and on this we stand! As for me, and I also believe for thousands of pastors in this nation who will have to speak for themselves: As a minister of the gospel, I will not officiate any same-sex unions or same-sex marriage ceremonies.*

**America: We stand believing that freedom of religion for all people promotes the common good of our nation and the world.**

*Freedom of religion belongs to our God-given human conscience; not to the Supreme Court, the Congress, any President, or the leaders of the world, business, any radical group, or anyone else that tries to restrain it.*

Not only is now the time now to lead believing and standing, but ...

## **2. NOW IS THE TIME TO LEAD LIVING AND GOING**

*In the midst of the fire of opposition, the church at Philadelphia held fast to His Word and did not deny Jesus' name. Because of this Jesus told them, "Look, I have placed before you an open door that no one is able to close." God was opening the doors for them so they could take the gospel to their world from Philadelphia. While their city was a gateway to the mountains, it also became a gateway for taking the gospel to their world.*

As they lived, we need to live out the gospel and ensure that it will go to the ends of the earth. It is not enough to just believe and stand, we must also live and go.

***Living must follow believing and going must follow standing.***

We need to emulate the church at Philadelphia. They not only understood the need to believe and stand, but to live and go. We need to go through the open doors and advance the gospel.

Even though the culture is darkening and religious liberty is eroding in our nation, God is opening up doors for each one of our churches. We

need to find a way to penetrate the growing lostness in North America and across the globe. It is urgent we penetrate lostness.

When you look at the churches of the Southern Baptist Convention and our history, it was in the reported year of 1972 when we experienced our largest number of baptisms: 445,725 baptisms. In that same year, we saw 137,667 12-17 year-olds baptized, almost double what we reach today. In fact, I was one of those teenagers baptized and counted in that very number.

Why was this our highest year of baptisms? Historically, it is referred to as, *The Jesus Movement*. God was at work in and through the teenagers, college students, young adults and beyond in America.

This is our greatest hope today. Yes, we need to pray for a 3<sup>rd</sup> Great Spiritual Awakening in America. A mighty move of God can wake up the fearful preacher, the dead church, the lifeless state convention, and even the complex Southern Baptist Convention. *A move of God can even turn America's heart back to God.*

Southern Baptists, we need to turn *our* hearts back to God. When the summary report of the Annual Church Profile from our churches was released last week, I was so burdened when I saw that our average attendance, baptisms, and giving declined in 2014. Our continual slow-grade decline in some areas is highly concerning to me. It is time for us as a convention to get honest with ourselves about where we are spiritually and practically. I do rejoice that we are gaining in the number of our churches. But reports show that our now 51,094 churches and congregations documented their evangelism so low in the 2013-2014 associational year, that it took us back to the level of our baptisms which existed 67 years ago, in the year of 1947 when we had only 144 million people in America, while today we have 321 million Americans.

*We are adrift on denial* if we do not recognize the dire need of where our churches are evangelistically. Most of our churches may have the doctrine right, but we are in an intensive care unit on a spiritual respirator regarding the lack of evangelism. We may have a reputation for being alive, but we are dead if our evangelism is dead.

We need a mighty move of God now. Yes, we need a 3<sup>rd</sup> Great Spiritual Awakening now. We need to call out to God now in repentance and seek His supernatural intervention now.

Simultaneously, we need take urgent action now. The doors are wide open and we must go. Pastors, we need to return to prioritizing evangelism in the church and having an aggressive strategy to reach our community with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Whatever it takes, we must risk it all to penetrate the lostness of our communities. It has to begin with those of us here today.

Our churches need to rise up and pray like never before, give like never before, believe like never before, stand like never before, live like never before, go like never before. The doors are wide open now and we must go, church-by-church, but also go together. We need each other.

We are family. To our Southern Baptists who are not with us, it is time to come home. Why? Because there are also churches right now in America that already align with us doctrinally, missiologically, and cooperatively that are considering joining us in advancing the gospel. We need them, they need us, and we need you to join us in advancing the gospel.

Over this past year of travel across the nation and world, I have spent time with established pastors and church planters from Montana to Texas and from California to New York; with state conventions and leaders from Alaska to Louisiana, and beyond. I have visited the

campuses of each of our outstanding seminaries that are equipping 18,000 future pastors, missionaries and scholars; and I have met with missionaries from all across the world, hearing their stories, praying with them, and encouraging them. I saw the look of resolve on their faces to finish the task from those living in the Middle East all the way to Cuba. I saw their burden so great, they would weep. Many of them are serving in countries where they would lose their lives if they were ever discovered sharing the gospel. Southern Baptists, this is not a fairy tale. The need is great, the hour is late, and we must advance the gospel together to every ethnicity in the world.

**Whatever the cost, whatever the risk, this worldwide mission thrust must be our priority.**

I appeal to you, that if anything in our churches, Southern Baptist entities, state conventions, and associations is not accelerating the Great Commission locally, nationally, and internationally, we need to rid ourselves of it now. The urgency is upon us!

The lostness has never been greater in our dangerous and hopeless world. Everyone, and I mean everyone, needs to rise up and lead.

*NOW is the time to lead. May the world never have to ask again, "Where are the leaders?" May our nation never have to ask again, "Where are the leaders?" May evangelicals never have to ask again, "Where are the leaders?" May our own churches and convention of churches never have to ask again, "Where are the leaders?"*

Southern Baptists, we now face another "whether we live or die moment" in our history. In this critical hour, will we lead? Now is the time to lead. Let's lead holding on to His Word and not denying Jesus' name. Take heart. Be encouraged.

*Jesus says to us today, "Look, I have placed before you an open door that no one is able to close."*

*Now is the time to lead!*