

**The President's Address:
Dr. Jerry Young, President
135th Annual Session - Memphis, TN - September 10, 2015**

A Focus on the Denominational Model, Evangelism, and Comprehensive Christian Education

I have come to this moment with an acute sense of the times in which we live. I come to this moment with a tremendous sense of the challenges that we face as a church in this secular, humanized culture. I come here with an acute sense of the challenges the church has because, in the words of John Stott (1), "The world is challenging the church." And in the language of some of the boys I played with in Lamont, MS, they used to say, "Put your money where your mouth is." Or they would say, "You either need to put up or shut up." There is the challenge that the world offers the church that says essentially, "Either you put up or you shut up."

The world is challenging the church. Dr. Stott's argument is that it challenges the church because man is still wrestling in darkness and he is still looking for a sense of transcendence. He wants to transcend his modern existence. And where he lives, he finds restlessness in his own heart, and he can't find any real peace. He lives in a million dollar home and sleeps in the best bed and yet he finds no rest. We live in that age where men declare that we have learned how to guide missiles to the moon and misguide men walking on the street.

We live in a difficult time in the history of our country where the church is challenged. I am tempted to just simply quote you a scripture and do all I can do and then ask Dr. Frank Ray or Dr. Tellis Chapman to close it for me. [However,] I feel an obligation to see if I can, in the next few moments, try to unpack this vision that God placed in my bosom. I feel some kind of obligation to say to you that I did not dream up this idea of transforming us from just a convention model to becoming a denomination with a witness here in America and in the world abroad. [I am obligated] to say that I didn't think that up on my own - it was dropped in my spirit. I wrestled with exactly what God was saying to me, and as I have wrestled with Him - I've got to be honest with you - I felt like my name was Jacob. And I kept wrestling and I finally told God, "Don't break my leg, I think I hear you!" And I want you to know today that I've come here to declare that I believe it is time for National Baptists to move away from a model that allows us to have three meetings and then go home and then come back again.

I believe it's time to move to another place. I really do believe that this is the time for us as a Convention to simply talk about: *How do we function in the 21st century?* I want to suggest to you that what God had placed in my bosom is that whole idea that (ultimately without question) you cannot (in this day and time) expect to be relevant if you are still answering questions that nobody is asking. You cannot remain relevant if you keep scratching folk where they're not itching. At some point you've got to raise the question, "How and where do we go from here?" I am convinced that now is the hour. No, we're not going to stop having convention [meetings], but we are going to change the way we function.

And I want to say to all of my preacher friends who I know are already much smarter than I am and much better preachers, I acknowledge that. I'm going to acknowledge now that I am acutely aware of Baptist polity. And I want you to know that I do not claim to be that intelligent but it has been my privilege to have taught Baptist polity. And I do not brag, but when I did my doctoral studies I wrote on Baptist polity. I've got a little knowledge of what Baptist polity argues and so I want you to know that – whatever I am going to say today – I already know that we are autonomous. So, I don't need for you to come tell me, "But you know all of us are autonomous." I know we are, but here's what I'm going to tell you. Now, Dr. Shaw has probably forgotten he said this but I kept notes. I heard him say once years ago that sometimes that which is the strongest doctrine or principle we have in the Baptist church is our weakest. That which is our strongest is sometimes also our weakest. And there are some times when we talk about being autonomous that Baptists believe that means that, "I do whatever I want when I get ready, nobody can say anything to me because, after all, I'm Baptist." Well, but what about being Christian? "Well, I don't know about that, but I'm Baptist."

I want you all to hear me today - hear me good - I am Baptist as well, but beyond being Baptist, I happen to be a Biblical Christian. I stand on the Word of God. And sometimes we can be "Baptistic" and Unbiblical. So I am aware. But I believe the time calls for us to voluntarily come together, not just 3 times a year, but have an intentional effort to forge a kind of working relationship among Baptists that looks like a denomination. Now I know some folks argue that we are in a post denominational era, and that nobody wants to say anything about denominations any more. Now you do know that in America we are always a few years behind. And I want to argue for the next few moments that I have why I believe that it's just important for us to transition in terms of our thinking, in terms of how we behave and how we act.

I read a book some years ago written by John Maxwell. John Maxwell wrote the celebrated book entitled, "The Winning Attitude" (2). If you'll remember in his book, he talks about taking a flight with his friend in his airplane after he had moved to Southern CA and wanted to see CA from the air. Maxwell says that when they started flying he noticed that his friend kept his eye on the instrument panel. And he noticed that there was one instrument that he kept watching all the time. He finally asked his friend, "What is that you keep watching?" And he said to Maxwell, "That is the airplane's attitude indicator." Maxwell said, "You mean to tell me that the airplane has an attitude?" His friend said that the airplane's indicator is there because it simply tells you where the airplane is in relation to the horizon. "The reason I keep watching it is because it's extraordinarily important because if you're going to change the direction of the airplane you have to do it by looking at the attitude indicator. And the attitude indicator will determine whether the airplane goes nose high or goes nose down." Maxwell said, "What are you trying to tell me?" His friend responded, "What I'm trying to tell you is that if you're going to change the direction of the airplane, you've got to change its attitude."

I hope you all are hearing me in here today – if we are going to change what we are doing, we've got to change our attitudes. I said, we're going to have to change our attitudes. I am so aware of how important it is for us to make sure that we have the right attitude.

And so, with that introduction, I want to see if I can give you, for the remainder of the few moments that I have in this address, [the answer to the question], "Why [I am] insisting on this denominational stuff and changing our functioning and how we do and what we do." It is because, believe it or not, that *together we are stronger than what we are individually*. How many of you remember this story out of the African country: The story is told that there was in the village a young child who got lost and wandered away from the village. And they discovered the child was gone and they called all the folk in the village to go and look for the child. And they all went looking and they looked everywhere for the child and couldn't find the child. They looked all day and then night came – they couldn't find the child. The next morning they went out to look again and this time someone said, since we've been out already, why don't we join hands when we go this time. And the story says they all joined hands and went back over the same territory but this time they found the child. And when they found the child, the child had just died. And the mother cried so profusely that they said to her, "Well at least you found the child." She said, "That's not why I'm crying. I'm crying because I'm thinking about what would have happened had we joined hands earlier."

I keep thinking in my mind what would happen if National Baptists would just join hands and come as a force in this country and declare that, "We are National Baptists!" Now, don't leave because I told you that I'm aware [of Baptist polity], but someone said the other day that Tennessee is a blessed state because it has two conventions. And I want to argue that Mississippi is more blessed than all of you are. Because we don't have two or three, we have five, six or seven. We've got conventions everywhere. But I want to tell you, and I know that someone is going to tell me that I have lost my mind, (and I understand), but let me tell you – I see denomination; I see us as a denomination and here's what I see: I see somewhere in the future that we ought not to have twelve conventions [or 10, or 5 or 6 in every state], but we ought to have one National Baptist Convention in a state. Now I just said something, and now no one is going to say, "Amen!," for the rest of this message. They are saying, "He's already messed up now. I know that will never happen in this life. Ain't no way in the world that can happen. It won't happen, over my dead body." Well, you do know folk die? I wouldn't challenge God like that. But can you imagine what it would be like if we had in Arizona - National Baptists of Arizona? National Baptists of New Jersey? National Baptists of Mississippi? Do you know that folk would recognize who we are? They don't even know who we are, so when they start counting numbers and counting people they don't count us because they don't know what "General Baptist" means.

I believe that somehow we've got to become a denomination. I also understand what that means. I know it means that some people can't be president. I know what that means, I understand it well. And listen carefully - I promise you this - I did not come to this place because I wanted to be popular or because I wanted prestige or power. I came here because I felt God had put a vision in my heart for National Baptists and I tell you I must be faithful to what God has placed inside of me. I've got to say what God has given me to say. And if I have to leave and give up the presidency tomorrow, I'm on my way home, but I want to tell you that **I believe God is still in charge**. I believe God is still on the throne. I believe God is still in charge. I believe God is still in charge! I believe God is still in charge! I believe that God is still sovereign. I know

some other folk have tried to excommunicate him from the world he established. I've come to tell you that **you can't give God an eviction notice**. The whole world belongs to Him.

I believe that we need to do a much better effort when it comes to evangelism as a church and as a denomination. Evangelism now is not even mentioned in many of our churches. And in many of our churches the baptistery is now a storage place. They haven't baptized anybody since I don't know when. And then, so many of us are bragging about the fact that the church is growing, but I want to tell you there is a difference between growing and swelling. Preachers get excited folk come from one church to another church – "They left them and came to me." I want to tell you, listen, here me when I tell you, that God wants us to go and make disciples. And when someone leaves the church where I am and goes to your church, that's not getting sheep, that's sheep shuffling. You don't enlarge the Kingdom.

At one time I thought we had too many churches. I'd drive through the community and thought that maybe that was the problem – *we have too many churches*. But I've learned that we're not over-churched we're under-churched. I've read the numbers and the numbers say that in 1900 we had 28 churches for every 10,000 Americans. In 1950 the numbers changed so that we had, not 28, but 17 churches for every 10,000 Americans. And in 2000 that number had changed. We didn't have 17, we had 12. And in 2004 we didn't have 12, we had 11. Churches are declining in this country. Churches are going out of business in this country. And do you not know that church attendance in this country has plummeted? Do you not know that in 1990, 20.4% of all the folk in America went to church. That number is going down. In fact, I've come to tell you if you didn't know, that people are determined that they don't need God, Jesus or the church. I've come to serve notice on you – listen – If I got it right, Jesus' last command, His last command when he got ready to exit our atmosphere, when he got ready to leave here I believe his last command was: "Go. And as you are going, I want you to make some disciples." And if I got this right, our Lord's last command ought not to be the church's least concern. Jesus told us, "You occupy until I get back." We've gotten so caught up with this modern world in which we live that we believe [that] is old-fashioned now. But I've come to tell you that I may be old-fashioned but I still believe that there is power in the Blood of the Lamb. I still believe. I said I wasn't gonna preach in here, but I still believe (Oh, bless His holy name!) that folk need to meet that barefoot boy born in a stable and grew up in the ghetto of a town called Nazareth. I still believe that Jesus is the only way. I still believe that He is the only way. I still believe that I've got to tell somebody that Jesus... Excuse me, but I'm just tired. In fact, I hope Fannie Lou Hamer won't mind me saying that, "I'm just sick and tired of being tired" of hearing preachers preach no Christ and no cross. I don't know what you're preaching if he didn't die. And if he didn't get up, I don't know what you've got to preach. The only reason I can preach anything - He died! Oh, didn't He die? Do I have any help in here? He died. He died. Oh, He died. But he didn't stay dead!

I won't keep you all day long, but I wish to God, my daddy is no longer here, but I wish my daddy was here right now. Because I don't know anyone who can say "early" like my daddy. I can't say it like he said it, but I hope you all don't mind, this is Mississippi: Errrly! Errrrly!!

Errrrrrly!!! Evangelism is our task. Now, we can do a lot of other stuff, but we can't forget to tell them He died and rose again.

I said I wasn't going to preach anything but I've got to admit I'm feeling real *churchy* right about now. I know you're saying, "Mr. President, just go on and stay with the script." But I want to tell you I know it's a long ways from where I've come from and I know that didn't nobody bring me here but Jesus. And so if you don't mind, just give me two seconds – I need to testify for a minute. Nobody but Jesus brought me here. I said, nobody but Jesus brought me here. And every now and then I have to just testify about what the Lord has done for me.

Evangelism is our work. And I need to say one word about education. I'm talking about comprehensive education, Christian education. I said comprehensive education – because once you evangelism them you need to educate them. I said, *once you evangelize them you need to educate them!* You've got to teach folk, because if you don't teach them...

Do you remember when Jesus got to Mary and Martha and Lazarus was dead and was already buried? And when Jesus got to the gravesite, and told Lazarus to come on out of there. You remember when Lazarus was on his way to the door, before he went downtown, Jesus told them to loose him and let him go. I believe he told them to loose him first because he didn't want him to go downtown a live man with dead clothes on. When folk get saved, they've got on dead men's clothes. And we've got to educate them so when they go downtown they [can] tell somebody I'm a *new* creature in Jesus Christ.

I've got a whole lot I want to tell you that we're going to do here, that I believe we ought to do as we move forward. [We are going to have] full time workers and we're going to do a whole lot of stuff. There's so much [to tell] that I can't tell it all to you [today], but we're going to do it.

Someone told me, they said, "Young, man, you are out of your mind. Baptists will never do that. There ain't no way you can talk about having no \$20 MM budgets. It won't happen. And ain't no need of talking about fixing this, it won't happen. Dr. Scruggs said 10,000 churches and it will never happen. Man, you don't understand." But there's so much to do here with the Credit Union and everything else. And they [are saying], "You can't do it." But I've got one thing to say to you before I go to my seat: Now unto Him who is able – **Is He able?? IS HE ABLE???**

Notes:

1. Rev. Dr. John R. W. Stott – 4/27/1921 – 7/27/2011. Dr. Stott wrote a number of influential books, which are noted for their clarity, balance, intellectual rigor, and biblical faithfulness. Stott's writing career started in 1954 when he was asked to write the Bishop of London's annual Lent book. Fifty years later, he has written over forty books and hundreds of articles. His memorial website can be found here: <http://www.johnstottmemorial.org/>

2. John C. Maxwell. 1992. The Winning Attitude Your Key to Personal Success. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishing. Website: <http://www.thomasnelson.com/the-winning-attitude>