

## WE HAVE THIS TREASURE

*We have this treasure in earthen vessels,  
that the excellency of the power may be of God.*

Fisher Humphreys

### **Introduction**

There is an irony about the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and it is this, that at a time in which the church is flourishing in our country, the forms of Christianity with which many of us have most sympathy and which for decades have enjoyed cultural hegemony in the South are experiencing a diminishing influence.

My proposal this evening is that we relinquish our aspirations to cultural hegemony and embrace our status as dissenters.

If we do so, we will be in good company. The first Christians were dissenters. So were the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century. So were the earliest Baptists of the seventeenth century. While I myself do not share the conviction of some of my friends that it is evil to exercise cultural hegemony, neither am I overwhelmed by the necessity we now face of being a dissenting minority group. Small can be beautiful.

What is required of us as dissenters is that we not lose heart. We should accept our status without defensiveness, or envy, or resentment. We should not spend our time trying to justify our existence. We should remain faithful and continue to do our work.

In order to do this, we will need three things. One is a set of values that will support us in our role as dissenters. In this new set of values the ideals of popular appeal and of cultural hegemony will be replaced by ideals such as a calm confidence in our message and a willingness to be quietly faithful without the expectation that our views will soon prevail. Second, we need clarity about what is most important to us. Third, we need strategies for carrying on our work effectively; we may never manage to convince very many people, but, if we fail, it should not be because we employed ineffective strategies.

For the new value system we will need to have a serious, extended conversation among

ourselves. For effective strategies, we will need wisdom from gifted leaders.

I am presenting this talk tonight in the hope that a theologian can help with the second need, the need for clarity about what is most important to us. In order to do this, I will articulate five of the things that are, I believe, precious to us.

These five beliefs are not a balanced view of either our Christian faith or our distinctively Baptist heritage. They are those of our commitments which happen to be at risk right now. Most of what we believe most deeply has not been challenged during the past nineteen years. In particular, the beliefs that we hold in common with all Christians are not at risk among Baptists in the South. Baptists throughout the South still share a consensus with all the Christians that there is one and only one true and living God. We all believe that God is the creator of all things, and that this world is now fallen. We all concur that in some mysterious way the one God is Father, Son, and Spirit, and that the Father sent the Son into the world. We all confess that Jesus the Son of God gave us marvelous teachings, did works of compassion for the suffering, created a new community, and died for our sins and rose again. We all acknowledge that the Father and the Son gave their Spirit to Jesus' followers and that the Spirit guides and empowers the church on a world mission. We share a common hope that God is going to complete this work in the future. We all agree that the Bible tells us this wonderful story.

These are our most treasured beliefs, the beliefs which bind us to Christians in all churches and in ages, and they are not at risk today. But some of our beliefs are at risk, and they too are important. My project this evening is to name, to explain, and to defend five of them.

### **1. The Priesthood of All Believers**

I begin with an issue that is close to home, namely, the priesthood of all believers. First, I will summarize where we are on this. In the Old Testament era, priests were an elite of male descendants of Levi and later of Aaron. Two Old Testament passages, Exodus 19 and Isaiah 61, contain references to a coming time when all of God's people will be priests. In 1 Peter 2 we read that these promises have been fulfilled in the Christian church. That Christians generally believed

this is confirmed by five brief, cryptic references to all believers as priests scattered throughout the book of Revelation.

The Bible does not give us a doctrine of the priesthood of all believers; what it gives us is an image of all of God's people acting as priests. Images are polyvalent; they are amenable to multiple interpretations, and across the centuries this image has been used as a warrant for many different proposals. Beginning with the influential work of Martin Luther, many of the proposals about the priesthood of all believers have been related to freedom. The idea is simply that, just as all Christians as priests are now free from the tyranny of a priestly caste, so we as priests experience freedom from other tyrannies. Thus Walter Shurden, in *The Doctrine of the Priesthood of Believers*, associated priesthood with five freedoms. With reference to salvation, every person has access to God. With reference to the church, every Christian engages in congregational decision-making. With reference to Christian living, every person is responsible before God. With reference to spiritual gifts, every Christian has one or more of the gifts. And with reference to the state, the ideal is a free church in a free state.

In San Antonio in 1988 the Southern Baptist Convention adopted Resolution Five which depreciated the importance of the priesthood of believers. It asserted the authority of pastors at the expense of the responsibility of all church members to participate equally with pastors in congregational decision-making.

What I want to do now is to try to untangle this issue. To achieve this, I will deal only with what the Bible directly associates with priesthood. In order to do this, I will treat things such as congregational decision-making and the separation of church and state as separate issues and talk about them later in the address.

What were the biblical meanings of priesthood? What did the Hebrew priests do that other Jews did not do? There were three closely-related things: priests led worship, they offered sacrifices, and they offered prayers on behalf of others.

They led in public worship, in the narrow sense of devotion to God. We want to retain the idea

of worship in this sense, and to work for it. Today American churches face a problem concerning public worship, and the name of the problem is entertainment. Our problem is no longer that the church is sometimes operated like a business; that was the problem in the past. Our problem today is the church is operated like a television show.

I do not think that worship services that include entertainment are always wrong, but I do think that entertainment always has the power to subvert worship and frequently does so. I recognize that entertainment can attract people to church services, but it cannot take people out of themselves and lead them to honor and adore God. It amuses and pleases, but it does not foster the selfless worship of God.

How can we as Christian priests retain worship? The first way is to make sure that our own worship services do help people to worship the Lord. A second way is to produce materials such as music, written prayers, liturgies, Bible meditations and devotions, and sermons, that will help others to worship. In doing these things, we shall be practicing the priesthood of all believers, leading in worship.

The second thing that Hebrew priests did was to offer animal sacrifices as part of worship services. From the beginning Christians did not offer animal sacrifices. They were, in fact, the only group in the Roman world who did not do so, and their rationale for not doing so was extraordinary. They believed that the death of Jesus was a final sacrifice that rendered all animal sacrifices superfluous.

Therefore, the sacrifices that Christians offered were spiritual sacrifices. One spiritual sacrifice was worship itself; Peter calls it a sacrifice in his epistle. Two other spiritual sacrifices were giving money to the poor and performing acts of compassion; in Hebrews we read, "Do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased" (Heb 13:16). Paul told the Romans that they were to give their lives to God as living sacrifices (Rom 12:1).

The sacrificial aspect of our priestly work seem to me not to be at risk among Baptists in the South today.

The third thing that priests did was to pray for other people. All of God's people have always been able to pray for themselves, but priests were responsible in a special way to pray for all. The early Christians felt responsible to pray for others in a special way.

For whom are we as priests to pray? I suggest, first, that we are to pray for the people who do not know God in Christ as we do. Paul told Timothy: "I urge . . . that requests, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgiving be made for everyone" (1 Tim 2:1). I find it fascinating that we Christians are to offer thanks to God on behalf of all people, to express for many a gratitude that they themselves either do not yet feel or do not know how to express. In the *Book of Common Prayer* there is a beautiful prayer that seems to me to be ideal when we pray for the world: "Open, O Lord, the eyes of all people to behold thy gracious hand in all thy works." If we include all humankind in our prayers regularly, we will be acting as priests on their behalf.

We ought also to pray on behalf of all Christians. This seems to be the most difficult part of our priestly work, because within the Christian community there are people who have rejected things that are very important to us. I am a Baptist, and many of my friends are Baptists, but all of my enemies are Baptists.

What am I to do about my enemies? What am I supposed to do about the people who have made themselves my enemies, not in the sense that they have rejected my views but in the sense that they have hurt me? Jesus was clear and emphatic about this; he said, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Mt 5:44). I wish there were some way around this, because it is very difficult and I do not want to do it. On the other hand, I am convinced that the most effective way of coming to terms with my feelings about my enemies and of coming to peace with myself when I have been hurt unjustly is to pray for those who hurt me. I find some help in realizing that in praying for them, I am following in Jesus' footsteps. I suspect that Christ is calling many of us to this difficult task, for the good of our own souls as well as for the good of the church at large.

There is, of course, the question of timing. Is this a good time for us to be doing the difficult

work of praying for our enemies? I think that it is. For one thing, it is always appropriate to carry out this work as soon as possible. For another, as time passes, our feelings are diminished, and that opens up possibilities for relating to those who have hurt us unfairly. And, in the third place, we may at some time be asked to answer the question, "How seriously have you responded to the apostolic command, 'If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone'?" At some time we must match the actions that we take toward the reconciliation of races, and the actions we take toward ecumenism and the reconciliation of the historic churches, with actions toward some sort of peace with our fellow Baptists.

How, then, shall we maintain our heritage concerning the priesthood of all believers? The best way, surely, is to practice it ourselves, and to show to others what it looks like when all of the members of a Christian community function as priests in worship, in the offering of spiritual sacrifices, and in prayer, including prayer for those who have hurt us unfairly.

## **2. Congregational Decision-Making**

I turn now to the second issue, congregational decision-making. There are two aspects to this important Baptist belief. One is that no one outside a congregation can tell a congregation what to do. The other is that each congregation is to arrive at its decisions democratically, that is, by working for a consensus and by a majority vote.

Professor Nancy Ammerman believes that the autonomy of congregations was forfeited in Southern Baptist churches when the influence of Nashville became so great that churches were virtually forced to follow its leadership. Others believe that autonomy is lost whenever an association disfellowships a congregation because, for example, it ordains women as deacons or calls a woman as pastor. I want to respectfully dissent from these two interpretations. I myself find Nashville eminently resistible. When I was a teenager my home church, as loyal a congregation of Southern Baptists as ever lived, did not use what was then called Baptist Training Union materials. Nor can I see that associations are interfering with a congregational prerogative when they set their own boundaries. Who else could set them? I do not agree with the boundaries

that some associations have set, but this does not entail that associations do not the authority to set the boundaries of their own memberships.

As I see it, it is the second aspect of congregational decision-making that is at risk today, and the new leaders made their position on it clear in Resolution Five. It is important for us to make our own position equally clear. I propose that our view includes the following three principles. First, we believe in strong pastoral leadership. We endorse the motivation that lay behind Resolution Five, which was that congregations should never hold pastors responsible for making certain things happen in the church and then deny to them the authority which they need in order to make those things happen. Second, we concede that churches may seek and may find God's will by accepting the will of a bishop or a presbytery. We do not condemn churches for doing this; we could not be good ecumenists if we did. But we do insist that the way of presbyteries and the way of bishops are not the Baptist way. Third, we stand by the old Baptist conviction that congregations should seek God's will by working for a consensus through prayer and conversation and democratic voting.

Now, how can we implement this threefold commitment? We must begin by really practicing it ourselves. In particular, we must seek for and welcome strong leaders in all positions in church life, and we must ask all of them to intentionally, humbly, and patiently work for consensus in church life and to refuse to impose their wills on those of the people.

Second, we should think carefully about what a church meeting ought to look like for those who believe in congregational decision-making. Norman Maring and Winthrop Hudson list four prerequisites for a church meeting. First, the people must be prepared by means of active participation in worship and by becoming informed about the church's concerns. Second, the meeting should be conducted as a humble waiting upon the leadership of the Spirit, sought through sincere prayer and the reading of Scripture. Third, all members of the church should participate fully. Maring and Hudson say that this becomes extremely difficult if not impossible in very large churches, and they suggest that churches that are too large for all members to

participate fully in a church meeting should consider limiting their own growth and starting another church. Now that is taking congregational decision-making seriously. Fourth and finally, every member should listen carefully during the church meeting because waiting on the guidance of the Spirit often means listening to others.

Church polity has always been a boring subject for me, and it still is. Perhaps one of the reasons that many of us have found it difficult to make a case for congregational decision-making is that, when it happens, it isn't going to be something which we will especially enjoy. It's a duty rather than a pleasure. But I myself am still convinced that it is a principle worth retaining. Underneath it lie two different styles of leadership, the autocratic and the collegial. Alongside those lie two different understandings of the responsibility of the laity, to be docile before their leaders or to participate fully in the church's life. Congregational decision-making is good because it openly invites the fullest possible participation by all church members. This in turn empowers them to use their God-given gifts and to grow into mature and responsible persons. A lot is at stake here. Beneath the boring polity question about how a congregation seeks to discern the will of God, profound spiritual issues are at stake.

### **3. Women in Ministry**

Closely related to congregational decision-making is the third issue, women in ministry. Once again it will be useful to see where we are on the issue before address it, and a good point of departure is the policy of the North American Mission Board. Southern Baptists now have the largest number of women military chaplains of any denomination. All of these women have been ordained, and all of them are endorsed by the North American Mission Board; the military requires both ordination and denominational endorsement of all its chaplains. So far as I know, the Board has no plans to reverse its position on endorsing ordained women as chaplains. What the Board has done is to refuse to provide financial assistance to mission churches that call ordained women as senior pastors. My concern now is not with the fact these two policies seem

incompatible, but with the fact that they are the current policies.

I call your attention to two things. The first concerns the theological meaning of ordination and the second concerns our interpretation of the New Testament.

The Roman Catholic understanding of ordination is that ordination confers an indelible grace which authorizes a man to preside at communion. This understanding of ordination is not compatible with Baptist polity, because Baptists believe that all Christians are qualified to lead in the two ordinances of the church. The magisterial reformers' understanding of ordination is that ordination confers the authority to proclaim the Word of God. That also is incompatible with Baptist polity because Baptists believe that all Christians are authorized to proclaim the Word of God. Neither of these two views of ordination as the conferral of authority is consistent with Baptist polity.

The understanding of ordination that is consistent with Baptist polity is that in ordination a church confirms a candidate's call to ministry and confers upon the candidate its blessing as the candidate embarks on that ministry. Of course, there are practical matters in addition to this, such as that one can serve in military chaplaincy or can legally perform marriages, but the theological meaning of ordination that is available to Baptists is that a church confirms a candidate's call to ministry and gives the candidate its blessing. Unlike the Roman Catholic or the magisterial reformers' views, this view of ordination does not involve the conferral of authority.

Given this understanding of ordination, the ordination of women is not a complicated matter. If a church is willing to confirm the call of a woman to minister and to confer its blessing upon her ministry, then ordination is a way to do that.

The second issue concerns how we interpret the New Testament. It may be true that women were not admitted to all forms of service in the New Testament church, though that is debatable. But even if that is true, the question is whether we today should follow their practice in letter or in spirit. If in the first century it was judicious for the church to exclude women from certain aspects of ministry, was that because of social and cultural conditions or because it was the eternal will of

God to reserve certain servant-leader roles for males? If it was because of social and cultural conditions, then in a changed social and cultural situation in which women work in all the professions and occupations, churches will be following the spirit of the New Testament teaching when they ordain women.

What great biblical principle guides the church in ordaining women? It is not simply a matter of our having isolated stories such as Mary studying with Jesus or isolated texts such as Paul's reference to there being in Christ neither male nor female (Gal. 3:28). The great teaching that is difficult to reconcile with the exclusion of women from pastoral ministry is the Pauline and Petrine teaching about spiritual gifts. Paul emphasized that all Christians have spiritual gifts and that all are responsible to use them so that the church can carry out its mission. If a woman discovers that she has pastoral gifts, she is responsible to use them, and the churches are responsible to confirm her call and to bless her in her ministry.

At the risk of being unpopular, I myself would counsel considerable tolerance toward those who do not agree. I can understand that many sincere Christians feel bound to obey the letter of some passages in the New Testament as expressing God's eternal will, especially since they are supported in that obedience by the traditional Baptist practice. It is we who are the progressives here, and those who resist women serving as pastors are the traditionalists, and I feel that we need to be understanding of those who do not see this as we do.

How do we work for our conviction about women in ministry? Obviously, what helps most of all is for women to enter the ministry and to minister well. It cannot be easy for them, and there are many byways to be avoided. But it is being done, and, in my judgment, it will continue to be done in the future.

A second way of working for this commitment is for churches to call women to serve as ministers. In this matter we have not made much progress. I know that it is difficult, but in the long run there is no substitute for it. Many of you who are here tonight probably could speak much more wisely about this than I can. I can only report that when my wife Caroline and I were

members of an English Baptist church in 1965-67 in which there were three co-pastors, one of them a woman, the experience was almost certainly more liberating for me than for Caroline or for the woman who was our minister.

I call upon you this evening to make this a matter of prayer, and I trust God will lead you and bless you as you do. And I want to add a note of hope here. I may be wrong, but I believe that history is on our side on this issue, a fact which, if we accept it, can provide us with quiet confidence as we proceed to do what we believe the Lord wants us to do.

#### **4. Biblical Interpretation**

The fourth issue to be addressed has to do with how we interpret the Bible. The Bible is the holy book for all Christians. God is the ultimate authority for Christian faith and life, and the Bible is our written authority because it is God's Word. All Christians share a large measure of agreement about its message, and it is very important not to overlook that. However, we also disagree on some things. Here in the South we tend to think immediately of conservative/liberal disagreements because we have been influenced by the fundamentalist/modernist controversy of the 'twenties, but we should remember that there were disagreements for centuries before the liberal/conservative options existed, and those disagreements divided the church into east and west and into Catholic and Protestant and further divided Protestantism into numerous groups. Further, many of us feel that it is improbable that any group has succeeded in getting all the truth and only the truth from the Bible. Our theology and ethics are incomplete because we are finite, and they are distorted because we are sinners.

Therefore we are always returning to the Bible to try to discern more adequately what is the mind of the Lord. The question is, "How can we best do that?" Some of us feel that the historical-critical study of the Bible is an aid to this; many Baptists in the South do not agree.

I want to begin by stipulating several things. One is that the historical-critical method of Bible study is not indispensable to understanding the message of the Bible. If that were so, no one would have understood the biblical message for over a thousand years; the method is a modern

one. We are aware that many people who do not read the Bible critically do nevertheless hear the message of God's Word correctly. I want further to stipulate that, in my judgment, the historical-critical method is not for all Christians, and I myself have no brief to impose it on anyone who prefers not to employ it.

Having made these stipulations, let me say that I believe that the method is a very useful one. Let me state briefly what it involves. To read the Bible historically is to be attentive to the historical factors which obtained during its writing. To read it critically is to begin intentionally to put our own questions to it. I take this understanding of criticism from R. G. Collingwood in his book, *The Idea of History*.

I believe that both of these activities, being attentive to historical factors and intentionally devising our own questions, help us to understand the Bible's message. Simply put, they help us get at God's message to us in Scripture just as a historical-critical reading of, for example, *The Canterbury Tales* helps us get at Chaucer's message. I will mention in passing that my first experience of the historical-critical reading of a text was in a class in Chaucer; the professor, whose name was Dollarhide, presented it so wisely, and showed its value so clearly, that my classmates and I welcomed it for what it was, a useful way of interpreting a text. It is also worth pointing out that recognizing the historical setting for a text sometimes has a decidedly conservative effect on interpretation; it acts as a constraint, preventing us from reading into the text things that are quite alien to it. But the principal justification for historical-critical study is that it helps us understand the meaning of the text.

How can we work for our conviction about this? Here I think I may have a useful strategy to propose. An old adage says that the proof of the pudding is in the eating. In my judgment, we will not get very far with very many people simply by defending the historical-critical method in principle. In fact, the word "critical" presents a major public relations problem. Dr. Penrose St. Amant once suggested that a more accurate and winsome name for the method would be "historical-analytical."

The best way forward, I think, is simply to do the work and then to present the results. When we teach and preach, we should present the results of historical-critical study and let them speak for themselves. If we offer insights into the Bible that commend themselves to people, they will learn to welcome the method by means of which we gained the insights. If, however, our insights do not commend themselves to people, then nothing we say in defense of the method will matter much to people. This is true not only in sermons or Bible studies, but in every college or university or seminary classroom or, for that matter, in every Sunday School classroom.

One more point. In my judgment, we would do well to interpret the Bible in more than one way. Some texts need no study. Others need historical-critical study. Still others need only to be meditated upon. Also, we need to be careful to allow for the study of texts within a communal rather than a private setting; reading in the company of other Christians provides us with interpretations from which we all benefit. Willingness to come to the text with more than one method seems to me to be the way forward.

## **5. Church and State**

The final issue with which I will deal concerns the relationship between church and state. Three factors have converged to make this an urgent issue. One is that Baptists in the South are in a position to affect American public policy more than ever before. Consider this simple fact: the four top elected federal officials in the United States are all Baptists from the South: President Bill Clinton, Vice-President Al Gore, Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, and the former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich. The second factor is that many Baptists in the South today are not as committed as earlier Southern Baptist leaders were to the separation of church and state. The third factor is that the longstanding tradition of the courts providing the best protection for our liberties, including religious liberties, has come to an end; think, for example, of how dependent we were on the courts in securing racial justice in this country in the 1950s and early 1960s. We cannot count on the courts that way any more, and we must lean more heavily than before upon the legislative and administrative branches of government for the protection of religious liberty.

Let me begin with two facts and two principles which seem to me to be indispensable for understanding the important issue of church and state. The first fact is that two centuries of separation of church and state have been very, very good for the church. The First Amendment is a success. The church is flourishing in this nation. We must not allow the constant complaint about America becoming secular to distract us from this reality. Americans are the most religious people of any industrialized nation, with the two Irelands and Italy trailing far behind.

The second fact is that these two centuries have also been very good for the state. America is now the most powerful nation on the planet by many measures, and it is probably as successful as any nation in accommodating religious pluralism. We must not let the culture wars distract us from this fact; we understand our situation best if we contrast it with the situations in Indonesia, Ireland, Sri Lanka, the Middle East, or Bosnia.

I also want to mention two principles. The first principle is that we are committed to the idea that our religious and moral convictions should become as influential as possible in public life. America needs the moral resources of the faith of its Christian people and churches. We are dissenters, but we are not sectarians.

The second principle is that we also are committed to the idea that the church and the state should be as separate from each other as possible, and that this is for the good of the church and the state.

These two principles are perfectly compatible. Admittedly, we sometimes have to think carefully to see how they are compatible, and we need a lot of wisdom in order to be true to both. But both are true: we seek to inject our moral vision into the public life of America, including its public policies, and we seek the separation of church and state as the best means of insuring religious liberty.

We welcome the participation of all Christians as well as all other citizens on the public square. We ask only that they do not mobilize the coercive powers of government in support of their religious practices. Of government we ask two things, that it never give such support and that it

never interfere with the religious life of the people except to achieve some compelling public interest such as the protection of human life.

What is the future of this issue? While I do not want to be too sanguine, we have reasons for optimism. The great institutional occasion for optimism is the Baptist Joint Committee, which continues to provide the wisest guidance we have in these matters. And the greatest individual occasion for hope is a Baptist layman whose name is Bill Clinton. He understands and appreciates the Baptist ideal of a free church in a free state. On one matter, the matter of religious expression in public schools, he has provided the wisest guidance we have ever been given in this nation. I refer to the letter which he instructed his Secretary of Education to send to all of the school boards in the nation in 1995. That letter displays the harmony that we believe exists between the need in American public life for the moral resources of the church and the need for the separation of church and state as the best protection for religious freedom for all Americans.

That does not mean that all is well, of course. The Supreme Court's 1997 declaration that the Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993 was unconstitutional was a severe blow to religious liberty. The law had mandated that all government laws and ordinances that burden anyone's religious practices are unconstitutional unless the government can demonstrate a compelling public interest for burdening the religious practice and also demonstrate that the laws or ordinances are the least restrictive means of achieving that public interest. It is not clear where we are on this issue now. For the moment it seems probable though not certain that the act still applies to federal laws. The 8th U. S. Circuit Court of Appeals has ruled that it is binding on federal law, and five weeks ago the U. S. Supreme Court refused to review that decision.

But the 1997 decision does mean that we must act if we are to have full protection at the level of states and municipalities. What can we do about this? Whenever I think about public policy, I think first of how very little power most of us have. The Southern Baptist Convention will be of only limited help to us, but it is of some help; in the end, for example, through its Christian Life Commission, it supported the Religious Freedom Restoration Act. On other issues, however, such

as a prayer amendment, parental choice in schools, and charitable choice, that is, the use of tax money to fund religious groups that teach their doctrines along with their charitable work, the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, as it is now called, is not a champion of the Baptist vision of the separation of church and state as a necessary means for achieving full religious liberty.

Is there anything that dissenting Baptists can do? We certainly can support The Baptist Joint Committee, as many of us are now doing. We ourselves can learn more about these issues. Some of us will have opportunities to speak about these issues to others, and we should certainly do that. And we can work for mini-RFRAs in each of our states. As of last week's election, Alabama is one of only four states that has a RFRA of its own. I am delighted that we are a leader in this matter.

### **Conclusion**

Here, then, are five things that we think that our Baptist heritage calls us to do in the coming years. We will live as priests to the world and to the church, in worship, sacrifice, and prayer. We will nurture congregational decision-making as our way of discerning the will of God. We will confirm God's call and confer our blessings upon all ministers, women and men alike. We will use all available methods in our efforts to understand God's Word to us in Holy Scripture, including becoming informed about the historical contexts of the documents and putting our most thoughtful questions to them. And we will maintain our commitment to the separation of church and state alongside our commitment to influencing American public life.

In my judgment, these things are more important now than they were before 1979. The church needs our leadership in worshiping God. The world needs our prayers. Christians everywhere need the kind of communities in which their gifts and thinking are welcomed. The church needs the fullest possible contribution from women, and Christian women, like Christian men, need the confirmation and blessing of the church as they use the gifts God has given them. The church and the world need the best possible understanding of God's Word in Holy Scripture, an

understanding that will come in part through historical-critical study of the Bible. Finally, the American people need our protest against the continued breaching of the wall of separation between church and state.

Our heritage in the CBF is a grand one, and it is natural to think of it in Paul's terms: *We have this treasure in earthen vessels* (2 Cor. 4:7). It's important to remember that the vessels are earthen; it's equally important to remember that they are filled with a treasure and that in our corner of the world we are the people who are carrying this treasure.

And my final word to you is: rejoice. It is not intrinsically a bad thing to be a dissenter. We are in good company, with each other and with those who went before us. So do not despair, be faithful, work wisely, and rejoice in the treasure that is yours.