

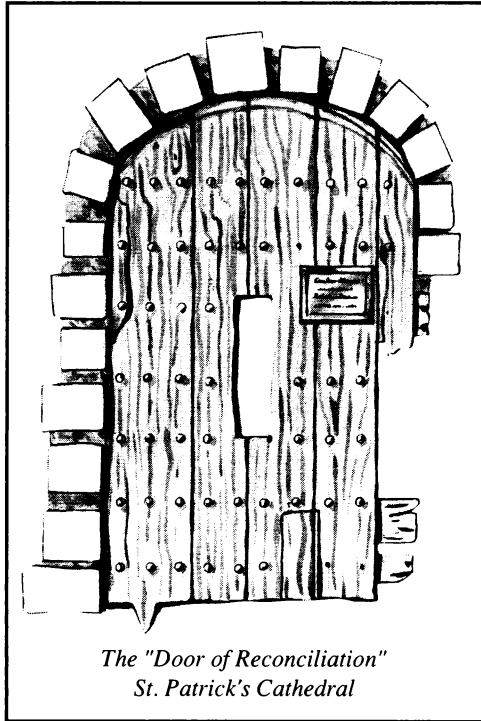
# RISKING THE ARM

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CONVOCAATION ADDRESS

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*The "Door of Reconciliation"  
St. Patrick's Cathedral*

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SOUTHERN BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY  
LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY

## Risking the Arm

Isaiah 43:1-7

*The following address was delivered by President Roy L. Honeycutt, at Fall Convocation, September 1, 1987, at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. The texts of several Scripture passages quoted in Dr. Honeycutt's address have been omitted for the sake of space.*

On display in St. Patrick's cathedral in Dublin hangs an ancient door with a rough hewn, rectangular opening hacked in the center. The story of this "door of reconciliation" and the related Irish expression of "chancing one's arm" is remarkable and instructive.

Almost 500 years ago, in 1492, two prominent Irish families, the Ormonds and Kildares, were in the midst of a bitter feud. Besieged by Gerald Fitzgerald, the Earl of Kildare, Sir James Butler the Earl of Ormond, and his followers took refuge in the chapter house of St. Patrick's cathedral, bolting themselves in.

As the siege wore on, the Earl of Kildare concluded the feuding was foolish. Here were two families worshipping the same God, in the same church, living in the same country, trying to kill each other. So he called out to Sir James and, as an inscription in St. Patrick's says today, "undertake on his honour that he should receive no villanie."

Afraid of "some further treachery," Ormond did not respond. So Kildare seized his spear, cut a hole in the door and thrust his hand through. It was grasped by another hand inside the church. The door was opened and the two men embraced, thus ending the family feud. From Kildare's noble gesture came the expression "chancing one's arm."

"Chancing" or risking one's arm often involves personal peril. Family feuds being what they were in 1492, when the Earl of Kildare thrust his arm through the hole in the door, a relative may have severed his hand!

After seeing the historic door in St. Patrick's cathedral and learning of Kildare's heroic action, I was struck by the fact that each of us needs to cultivate *the will to risk*.

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## I. The Will to Risk

Life without risks forfeits exceptional achievements. Successful athletes, financiers and other professionals succeed in large measure because of their willingness to assume risks. That risks are also prerequisite to effective service in God's Kingdom should be obvious. Biblical personalities consistently demonstrated their will to risk. One of the better illustrations of that jeopardy is Jesus' parable of the talents which clarifies the risk factor in kingdom service (Matt. 25:14-18).

Unlike the unwise servant who was afraid to risk the money entrusted to him, you have responded to your stewardship of life with the conviction that risk taking is essential to Christian discipleship. To use the Irish expression, you are willing to "chance your arm" and face uncertainty because of your conviction of God's intention for your life. Achieving his purposes makes the risks acceptable.

### 1. **Students who will to risk are essential for a quality theological seminary.**

#### 1) *The risks of material and personal dislocation.*

For those of you who are entering or returning students, your first risk focuses on material needs and personal relocation. You have moved to a new area of the nation, expended significant financial resources and assumed continuing commitments in order to come to Southern Seminary. Like the Earl of Kildare you have been willing to "risk your arm" by thrusting yourself into a new and unknown community.

#### 2) *The risk of authentic seminary education.*

Our English word "educate" comes from a family of Latin words meaning to "lead forth" or "draw out."

Authentic education means to "draw out" an individual's latent potential. Of course, education also involves stimulating experiences and a gigantic infusion of external knowledge. Ultimately, however, authentic education draws out a student's potential capacities. As you experience that quality of authentic education at Southern Seminary, you will quickly discover that such

an educational experience reveals two “risks.”

*a. The “risk” of spurious education.*

Spurious education is hazardous to the extent that it misleads students and distorts truth. You have already resolved that risk by choosing a seminary committed to authentic education. The remaining danger, however, is that you may allow the fascination of spurious education to erode the validity of your educational experience at Southern Seminary.

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**“We Baptists are especially vulnerable to the temptation of believing that 51 percent of an assembly can determine the truth, and do so as quickly as it takes to count the votes.”**

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Simulated education is highly popular. Some misconstrue scholarship as confirmation or indoctrination. Others confuse learning with custom or tradition. A few are more concerned with acceleration and a “quickie” degree than they are with authentic educational experiences. To the contrary, regardless of the theological direction from which it may come, there is no place in authentic education for brainwashing.

Isaiah appropriately described individuals who magnify past traditions as opposed to personal religious experience when he chided his contemporaries for practicing a “memorized religion” (Isa. 29:13).

Spurious education is a uniquely intense hazard for persons in a free church tradition where decisions are settled by majority vote. We Baptists are especially vulnerable to the temptation of believing that 51 percent of an assembly can determine the truth, and do so as quickly as it takes to count the votes. In this regard I recall reading an anecdote in the “Humor in Life” section of *Reader’s Digest*

describing a “show and tell” period during which a child brought a kitten to share with her class. A second pupil asked, “Is it a boy or a girl kitten?” A third child quickly added, “I know how we can find out — we can take a vote on it.” There are times when it seems we Southern Baptists believe any aspect of truth can be resolved by majority vote — even the gender of a kitten.

Truth is not determined by the response others make to its claims. Its reality is self authenticating and rises outside our emotional responses. “Truth,” said Sir Winston Churchill, “is incontrovertible: Panic may resent it, ignorance may deride it, malice may distort it, but there it is,” the truth.

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**“Confusing truth with majority opinion, we forget too quickly the history of those dark centuries in which the majority was wrong. After all, the majority crucified Jesus and hounded the early church from one shore to another during its infancy.”**

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Last year someone used what he thought was a humorous illustration to emphasize the appropriate response of seminary faculties to actions by the Southern Baptist Convention. To the laughter of many, he said that if the Southern Baptist Convention should vote that pickles have souls, then professors should teach that pickles have souls.

Our commitment at Southern Seminary and the responsibility of this faculty is to say, “No, pickles do not have souls. The Bible does not teach that pickles have souls. Neither Christian history nor theology have taught this. Baptists have never affirmed a ‘pickle theology’ in any confessional statement. The truth is: pickles are cucumbers soaked in vinegar, flavored with a variety of spices.”

Confusing truth with majority opinion, we

forget too quickly the history of those dark centuries in which the majority was wrong. After all, the majority crucified Jesus and hounded the early church from one shore to another during its infancy.

Illustrations of the fallacy of the majority are too numerous to enumerate; as are the errors of the minority. Consider, however, the conviction that the world was flat and that if one sailed far enough ships would fall into an endless abyss. Or remember that by observing the heavenly bodies and the movement of the tides, Copernicus and Galileo concluded that the world must be moving, not stationary. To counteract those fledgling scientists and to support their conviction that the earth did not move about the sun nor "wobble" upon its axis, ecclesiastical powers appealed to the Scripture for biblical evidence. To prove their point they misused the psalmist's statement that "the world is established; it shall never be moved" (Ps. 93:1).

*b. The subtle "risks" of authentic education.*

If the hazards of spurious education are obvious, the dangers of authentic education are even more subtle. Authentic education has some admitted but nonetheless positive hazards which will challenge you to risk not only ascertaining the truth but living consistently with that discovery.

The *risk* of authentic seminary education means never again in good conscience will you take matters for granted. The *reward* is that you will acquire the attitude and commitment of knowing and understanding for yourself on the basis of accurate information.

The *risk* of authentic seminary education will expand your concept of God as well as your personal relationship with him. Prior perceptions of God will become microscopic by comparison with his cosmic presence. The *reward* is that God will transcend our limited scheme of thought and the patterns of action we associated with him in an earlier era. God will not have changed but our perceptions will have enlarged and become more rewarding.

The *risk* of authentic seminary education leads us to discover that God is quite able to defend himself. He may no longer need us as his defense attorneys. The *reward* is that we will no longer feel compelled to limit science and other academic disciplines to prevent them from transcending God. We will become more concerned with declaring God's mighty acts than in arguing about God. Our perception of God will elongate and broaden to encompass all of life, even an ever expanding universe. He will, indeed, become Lord of all in each of our lives.

The *risk* of authentic seminary education means we have to move out of the driver's seat in our decision making. For the Bible will become our authoritative norm for decision making rather than old traditions. No longer will you be satisfied with second hand traditions about religion and theology. The *reward* is that you will experience a new quality of personal relationship with the Lord which will prioritize your life.

The *risk* of authentic seminary education means some treasured convictions may be abolished. The *reward* is that those will be replaced by others, equally or more firmly established. In fact, in most instances, earlier perceptions of God and your understanding of Scripture will be confirmed. For authentic education is a strong ally to valid religious experiences.

In all change, however, I urge you to follow the wise counsel of Dr. W. O. Carver, speaking at this pulpit a short time before his death. He cautioned us to be certain that we had something better to replace the "furniture of our minds" before we threw out our old furniture. Or, as we students often said to one another when I attended Southern Seminary: Seminary experiences are like eating fish; no one eats the bones! You pick and choose what you are convinced is true, appropriate and consistent with your Christian experience. This, too, is crucial to authentic education.

None of these risks should be disturbing. Nor should they deter you from seeking a quality education available for you at Southern Seminary. Few of us would choose the example of church leaders in the time of Galileo whose minds were closed to truth. They refused to look through the telescope because they knew they would not be permitted to believe what they would see.

**2. Faculty who will to risk are essential for quality education.**

The larger context of the Southern Baptist Convention creates a context of risk for faculty committed to authentic education, consistent with the heritage of Southern Seminary. Despite the decade of harassment and intimidation of this faculty, both seminary administration and faculty remain committed to authentic education as a hallmark of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. We reject forthrightly every form of pseudo scholarship which interprets education as merely the indoctrination of students with predigested teachings, the ratification of tradition or the confirmation of custom.

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Primacy of Scripture and liberty of conscience are crucial for achieving the purposes of seminary education. Those established principles constitute the foundation and the parameters for authentic education. With contemporary Southern Baptists and our forebears we remain dedicated to our Baptist heritage which affirms liberty of conscience alongside biblical authority:

*God alone is lord of the conscience, and he hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are in anything contrary to his word, or not contained in it (Abstract of Principles, xviii).*



In such a covenantal context Southern Seminary has existed since 1859 as a community of faith and learning in which freedom of inquiry rests squarely upon the Gospel. Faith seeks understanding which requires openness of mind guided by the Holy Spirit.

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**“Academic freedom in a seminary rests upon the Gospel itself as it creates a community in which the spirit of Christ informs and judges all human activities and becomes the source of genuine freedom.”**

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As teachers and administrators, we function with the conviction that Christian faith directs all thought and life toward God who is the source of truth, the judge of all human thoughts and the ultimate end of all theological inquiry. Such commitment to freedom in teaching and learning arises from the Christian faith with its promise of freedom in Christ to know the truth which is from God, which judges all human forms and institutions and which will set persons free (John 8:32).

Academic freedom in a seminary rests upon the Gospel itself as it creates a community in which the spirit of Christ informs and judges all human activities and becomes the source of genuine freedom.

A succession of dedicated ministers/scholars have brilliantly demonstrated that assumption for over a century in the life of Southern Seminary. Broadus, Carver, Robertson, Mullins, Sampey — all demonstrated intellectual vigor and spiritual acumen in their commitments to theological scholarship. Each taught “in accordance with and not contrary to” the Abstract of Principles, and each fulfilled his responsibility to the Southern Baptist Convention with integrity and honor.

Their classrooms were characterized by open inquiry into biblical truth, a common commitment to fundamental principles of our Baptist heritage and an unfaltering loyalty to the lordship of Christ.

Southern Seminary has consistently sought persons for faculty positions who understood and pursued that valued tradition. It is to this model that we now turn for continuing guidance as we reaffirm our commitment to accomplish our professorial and administrative responsibilities with freedom and responsibility. Institutionally, we are thoroughly committed to fairness as defined in the "Glorieta Statement," but fairness requires neither short circuiting the educational process nor dismantling the integrity of authentic education.

While clearly aware that freedom is not to be confused with license, we accept with gratitude the trustees' commitment to truth as the object of theological study: "The theological teacher and students have the inquiry for truth central to their vocation and they are free to pursue this inquiry" (*Academic Personnel Policies of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary*, p. 15).

## II. The Conquest of Fear

Where does one turn for resources of strength and determination necessary to validate risk taking and turn hazards into achievements? Isaiah of the exile addressed persons in his generation who were asking the same question. The closing verses of Chapter 42 vividly portray the anxiety and frustration of people suffering through the exile of faith.

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**“Perhaps even in our deepest crises God remains at work creating a "new thing" of the chaos which seems now to dominate.”**

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From Isaiah's salvation oracle in Chapter 43:1-7 each of us can discover courage to overcome our fear. Again and again Isaiah inspires us to dismiss our fear, saying, as in this oracle: "Do not be afraid" and "Fear not" (vs. 1, 5). Such encouragement was an affirmation of historic biblical faith and a clear reflection of the promises made to the patriarchs: "Do not fear"

Abraham (Gn. 15:1), Isaac (Gn. 26:24), Jacob (Gn. 46:3), Moses (Nu. 21:34).

The prophetic call for courageous and fearless living characterizes the primary emphases of Isaiah as he counsels the exiles to “fear not” (41:10, 13; 43:1, 5; 44:2).

Given the reality of oppression and judgment which he had described in the preceding chapter, on what basis does Isaiah consistently counsel believers to dismiss our fear? He implies two reasons for living courageously and fearlessly. These are: who God is and what God does.

## 1. Who God is (43:1, 3).

### 1) *The Creator God (v. 1a).*

Isaiah of the exile never considered creation in isolation from Israel’s present experiences. As Gerhard von Rad has illustrated in his essay on creation in Second Isaiah, the prophet always linked creation with redemption (“The Theological Problem of the Old Testament Doctrine of Creation,” *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Problems*, p. 134).

The same ought to be said of other Old Testament literature, including the first chapter of Genesis. Creation in the Old Testament was concerned with far more than merely first origins.

Isaiah also clearly identifies God’s creative and redemptive work as ushering in a new beginning. Just as Isaiah of the exile maximizes the theme of the exodus by emphasizing at least ten times that the Lord will bring about a new exodus, so he also emphasizes that God is in the process of initiating a new creation. Throughout chapters 40-66 there is the recurring of “new things” which the Lord is about to do.

Perhaps even in our deepest crises God remains at work creating a “new thing” of the chaos which seems now to dominate. Isaiah encourages disconsolate Israel by reminding her that even in the disaster of exile God was at work creating a “new thing.”

Like ancient Israel overcome by hostile powers during the exile, I cannot clearly see or identify the new thing that God is doing for Southern Seminary or in and for our lives individually. But my belief that he is

always creating new things, bringing order out of chaos, is as certain as my conviction of who God is in the crucified and risen Lord, Jesus Christ.

Such an emphasis on “new things,” so characteristic of Isaiah 40-55, fuses the prophet’s accent on creation and redemption.

*Behold, the former things have come to pass,  
and new things I now declare; before they spring  
forth I tell you of them (42:9).*

*Behold, I am doing a new thing;  
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?  
I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers  
in the desert (43:19).*

*You have heard; now see all this;  
and you will not declare it?  
From this time forth, I make you hear new things,  
hidden things which you have not known.  
They are created now, not long ago;  
before today you have never heard them,  
lest you should say, “behold, I knew them.”  
You have never heard,  
you have never known,  
from of old your ear has not been opened.  
for I knew that you would deal very treacherously,  
and that from birth you were called a rebel (48:6-8).*

*The nations shall see your vindication,  
and all the kings your glory;  
and you shall be called by a new name  
which the mouth of the Lord will give (62:3).*

*For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth,  
and the former things shall not be remembered or come  
into mind (65:17, emphases mine).*

## 2) ***The Redeemer God” (v. 1c)***

Reconciliation always involves risk and sometimes personal sacrifice and pain. Certainly this was true of our Lord who reconciles us to our heavenly Father and

to our brothers and sisters. God came to us in Christ as the great reconciler, hacked a door into history and thrust his hand through the door of human alienation. Few grasped his Son's hand. To the contrary, the multitude of "relatives" with mixed motivations crucified the reconciler.

Yet, of that reconciling act Paul said, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor. 5:19). Because our Lord was willing to "risk his arm" for our redemption there is for us a door of reconciliation not only between ourselves and our heavenly Father but between us and other persons (Eph. 2:14, 15).

3) *The Personal/Purposeful God (v. 1d).*

Few actions affirm relationships more powerfully than to call one's name. It is in the quality of that intimate relationship with the Lord that he called you to a unique form of Christian ministry. He claimed your life by the power of the Risen Christ and said, "You are mine."

No matter how old you grow, how much you learn or how far you travel, you will never be able to dismiss the reality of God's call. His calling will sustain you when you are weary, strengthen you when you are weak, bring peace when you are troubled and cause you to face every crisis with tranquility — so long as you remain convinced that you are where you are and doing what you are doing in response to his divine command.

2. **What God does (vs. 1-2).**

1) *He provides his presence.*

The promise of God's continuing presence through every crisis is adequate reason for courageous, fearless living. Indeed, one could write a theology of the Old Testament around the theme of "Presence." It is the divine presence in history and especially shared with individuals that remains the focus of the Bible. Whether to patriarchs or prophets, apostles or martyrs

of the church, the unshaken presence of God was an unfailing source of courage, resolution and determination to live in the Father's will.

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2) *He cares for us.*

Many of us pretend we need no one else; that we are self sufficient. In response to the idea of the “self-made” person, there is the reminder that there are no self-made persons. There are only persons who fail to recognize how blessed their lives have been by the care of other persons. If this is true of our human interpersonal relationships, how much more is it true of the divine relationship. Although we acknowledge the care and love of other persons, most of us affirm the lines of the gospel hymn: “No one ever cared for me like Jesus.”

It is this divine care which sustained Israel and which now sustains us in the times through which we are living. How reassuring it is to know that God continues without change to manifest himself to us as to Isaiah and the beleaguered exiles: “you are precious in my eyes” (v. 4a); and “honored” (v. 4b); “and I love you” (v. 4c).

Until we have made personal response to God, he remains a mere idea or a principle; a concept embedded in our thought processes and limited to mental gymnastics and speculation. Only as we experience him at a new dimension of personal relationship does he become truly authentic. So also of the dismissal of fear. It

matters little who God is and what he does until we make such personal response as to claim both his identity and his historical action.

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**“Despite the shadowed nature of our times, which are so much like Israel's exile in a strange land, this can be the finest hour of our generation. So I urge upon you, faculty and students, to keep the vision of an authentic education despite the pressures now being applied to institutions of learning.”**

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Martyrs and saints of the centuries died with words of fidelity and commitment as their final testimony and abiding conviction. Psalmists, apostles, martyrs of the church — together they walked through fires of adversity knowing their hope of deliverance ultimately rested in the Risen Christ. Oftentimes it was with their last breath they committed life to God before experiencing death.

*“Into thy hands I commit my spirit,  
thou hast redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God”  
(Ps. 31:5).*

*“Then Jesus said with a loud voice, “Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit and having said that he breathed his last” (Lk. 23:46).*

The day will come when historians who assess this institution may record our commitment to authentic education, an open mind, eternal truth and courageous action among Southern Seminary's finer qualities. Contingent upon the nature of our response as faculty, administrators and students, that summary of Southern Seminary could be appropriate.

Despite the shadowed nature of our times, which are so much like Israel's exile in a strange land, this can be the finest hour of our generation. So I urge upon you, faculty and students, to keep the vision of an authentic education despite the pressures now being applied to institutions of learning.

### III. Summary

In the late summer of this year, June and I drove to Tennessee to visit our daughter on her birthday. While with her we visited the exhibit "Ramasses II" in Memphis, Tennessee. The center piece of that exhibit was the colossal granite statue of Ramasses II. The restored colossus weighs 47 tons and required a 45-ton fork-lift and a 50-ton crane to reassemble the statue on a steel girded weight distribution platform. Its height required that ceiling tiles be removed from the auditorium's 38-foot ceiling to accommodate the statue.

When the mayor of Memphis, Tennessee, negotiated with Egyptian officials to move the statue from Memphis, Egypt, following its restoration, permission was given with several stipulations. One requirement was that the statue of Ramasses II could be exhibited only in an upright position. Pharaohs may lie down in Egypt, as the statue had done in the desert sands for thousands of years after it toppled over at ancient Memphis. On foreign soil, however, modern Egyptian officials insisted that the Pharaohs always stand up!

There is a powerful parable in that for us at Southern Seminary. When Southern Seminary is at its finest, it always stands up. There is no role for this seminary when it lies down in subordination to hostile forces.

It is in this spirit that I invite you to voice your commitment by singing "How Firm a Foundation." Sing joyfully, confidently and courageously. Sing as a testimony of faithful endurance to God's truth. Sing victoriously as those who know that the strength of their foundation rests in the power of the Risen Christ.



