

AlbertMohler.com

The Assurance of Things Hoped For

Monday, June 29, 2009

THE ASSURANCE OF THINGS HOPED FOR: A LIVING STEWARDSHIP FOR THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY AND THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONVENTION

R. Albert Mohler, Jr., President

Delivered June 24, 2009 at the Service Commemorating the Sesquicentennial of the Seminary's Founding



I greet you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ as we join together to commemorate and to celebrate the sesquicentennial of the founding of The Southern

Baptist Theological Seminary. This is a moment filled with memory, gratitude, promise, and wonder. Here, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, we gather in the shadow of those who a century and a half ago established this great institution and dedicated their lives, their reputations, their hopes, and their unflagging energies to the great task of training ministers of the Gospel.

We gather to celebrate fifteen decades of history and to consider the magnitude of this moment in light of the eternal purposes of God. Behind us stands a long line of faithfulness, traced through many generations and reaching around the globe. Those who established this school in 1859 could scarcely imagine that we would commemorate this occasion as the Southern Baptist theological seminary now looks to the future propelled and inspired by a century and a half of history.

To be human is to experience time. We are chronological creatures, who cannot imagine our lives without reference to the frame of past, present, and future. We make constant reference to the clock and the calendar. Our consciousness is marked by memory and we feel the passage of time in the marrow of our bones. We find ourselves marking time by anniversaries and celebrations of past events that provide the necessary context for understanding who we are and to whom we belong.

For the people of God, memory serves not only as a necessary faculty of human consciousness, but as a stewardship. Memory is required for faithfulness, even as Israel was constantly reminded to remember and to commemorate the great acts of God that brought Abraham out of Ur, Israel out of Egypt, and the children of Moses into the land of promise.

Likewise, Christians are called to commemorate the saving acts of God in the death, burial, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are to live in the present, drawing our confidence from our sure and certain knowledge of God's saving acts and of Christ's promises to his church. We cannot live without memory, and our confidence for the future is secured by our Lord, who is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

A sesquicentennial celebration takes us well outside any human lifespan. Though some present among us today can

trace their lives through much of this institution's history, not one of us was present when the historic events that brought The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary into existence took place. Though the origins of the school can be traced far behind 1859, that year marks the historic founding of the school. Thus, it is to 1859 that we look as we seek to ground our story in the frame of time, place, and purpose.

Just three years earlier, James Petigru Boyce had delivered his inaugural address as a professor at Furman University. With an audacity that can only be described as breathtaking, matched to a vision more bold than others could see, Boyce delivered the Magna Carta of Southern Seminary. Though Southern Baptists could at that time point only to a handful of struggling theological departments in colleges and universities, Boyce saw both the need for and the promise of a great central theological institution that would serve the churches of the Southern Baptist Convention as the young denomination looked to the future and to the call of God to the nations.

In retrospect, it is nothing short of amazing that the institution ever came into existence. Though many shared Boyce's dream of a central theological institution, others thought his conception to be too bold, too ambitious, or too costly to their own institutional purposes. The establishment of Southern Seminary required not only vision, but also a level of commitment, generosity, and sacrifice that surpassed anything that founding generation had ever known before.

Of course, the level of commitment required for Southern Seminary's founding would quickly be exceeded by that required for the school's survival. As Professor Gregory A. Wills recounts:

On the first day of October 1859, four young professors and nine students opened the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. It was an uncertain undertaking. Southern Baptists were not sure that they needed it, and many doubted its success. And opposition to it came from many quarters. By November Professor Basil Manly Jr. judged that the seminary's survival was already "drawing to a crisis," and he grieved at the prospect of seeing "so auspicious a moment for Southern Baptist interests come to naught."

Thankfully, that moment did not come to naught, but the question of the school's survival remained open, to a greater or lesser degree, well into the twentieth century. Even then, crises and the challenges would arise and recur. An endeavor this bold would require successive generations of almost irrational dedication to the cause.

Celebrating this occasion, our minds naturally go back to Greenville, South Carolina and to that October day in 1859 when James P. Boyce, John A. Broadus, Basil Manly Jr., and William Williams, joined by only nine students, stepped into history. Those who observed that first day of classes must have marveled that such a day had ever arrived. At the same time, the foreclosure of their dream loomed as an ever-present possibility.

The Southern Baptist Convention had been established only 14 years previously, and the churches of the young denomination were stretched to support two mission boards and their own ministries. A network of struggling colleges and universities had been established, but nowhere in the South could a central theological institution for Baptists be found. Not, that is, until that October day in 1859.

Seen in that light, the history of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary is integral to the history of the Southern Baptist Convention. The story of this school cannot be told without constant reference to the convention of churches to whom it belongs and whose cause it serves. Even as we commemorate the four founding faculty of the school, we must thank God for the vision and sacrificial commitment of countless Southern Baptists whose names are known only to God.

In a sense, an institution like Southern Seminary must have its story told in a structure more like biography than history. We naturally think of the founding of the school as something akin to birth, and we trace the history of the school through phases that correspond to something like childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.

Seen in this frame, the childhood of Southern Seminary was tempestuous, dangerous, and filled with peril. The young school would soon find itself in the maelstrom of national strife and the division. The Civil War would tear the nation asunder and put the school into a hiatus from which only the boldest could be confident the school would ever emerge. But, Southern Seminary did survive the war, but the newly reopened school soon found itself in no less peril as war gave way to Reconstruction. Southern Seminary's transition from childhood to adolescence required energies and sacrifices that would exceed even those required for its founding.

The generation of E. Y. Mullins brought Southern seminary into the twentieth century and, to a considerable degree, into the modern world. Many in that generation could trace their lifelines back to the founding of the school in 1859, but they would know a world vastly different from that of the founding generation. Along with the Southern Baptist Convention, Southern Seminary would see the new century as a time of unparalleled opportunity and continuing progress.

Of course, the experience of the twentieth century was, as no shortage of historians remind us, vastly different from that envisioned by so many as the century dawned. Yet, even through the experiences of two world wars, a vast economic depression, and the transition of the United States into the position of world leadership, this Seminary continued to expand its reach and its vision even as the Southern Baptist Convention experienced unprecedented growth, outstripping the dreams of 1845.

In one sense, the twentieth century would see the world changed over and over again. Horses would give way to railways, which would in turn give way to automobiles and airplanes. The century would see the development of antibiotics, the splitting of the atom, and man on the moon. The United States would become a superpower and the globe would shrink as communications and travel were transformed. The demography of the United States would be reshaped as great urban centers developed and their populations burgeoned. Tremendous social, moral, and political shifts would reshape American culture and challenge its churches.

Throughout the decades, Southern Seminary turned out hundreds and then thousands of ministers of the Gospel, missionaries, and denominational leaders. Southern Seminary was at the forefront of the denomination's growth, expansion, and dreams.

Of course, there were also times of testing and trial. When James P. Boyce set out his vision for a central theological institution for Southern Baptists, he both understood and insisted that the school must be confessional to the core, committed without reservation to the historic Christian faith, to Baptist beliefs, and to an eager embrace of the faith once for all delivered to the saints. The history of this school stands as a humbling reminder of the necessity of that task.

Boyce understood what others both failed and refused to see. An institution that was not boldly committed to the revealed truths of Christianity – without hesitation or reservation — would quickly become an infectious source of heterodoxy into the lives of our churches. The twentieth century saw the pervasive influence of theological liberalism bring mainline Protestantism to disaster and decline. By God's grace, Southern seminary and the Southern Baptist Convention would, at century's end, emerge from the convulsion of necessary controversy into an opportunity for renewed faithfulness and recovered conviction.

As we observe this spectacular occasion today, we do so with the knowledge that God has afforded this school the opportunity for a new future even as we have recovered the convictions upon which the school was first established. On this occasion, we celebrate the gift of this opportunity and the stewardship it represents.

So long as The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary exists, it must serve the churches of the Southern Baptist Convention by training God-called ministers of the Gospel for service, leadership, and the tasks of ministry. We stand without apology upon the authority, inspiration, infallibility, and inerrancy of the Bible. Without qualification, we require every professor to affirm all that is contained within the Abstract of Principles and The Baptist Faith and Message. Without embarrassment, we bear the scandal of the cross even as we seek to produce a generation filled with unprecedented passion to see the nations exult in Christ and the Gospel taken to the uttermost part of the world.

Our sesquicentennial requires us to remember that Southern Seminary is a servant to the churches. We gladly serve the churches of the Southern Baptist Convention and this institution would never have come into existence, much less have arrived at a moment of such unprecedented promise, without the faithful prayers and the generous support of the convention and its churches. Through the Cooperative Program, the hopes for more faithful ministry have been minted into the lives of literally thousands of ministers and missionaries serving all around the world.

In the year 2009, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary stands as one of the leading theological institutions in the world, one of the largest theological institutions in the history of the Christian Church, and one of the most venerable and respected institutions of the evangelical world. All this comes by the grace and mercy of God. A smiling providence marks this school's celebration of such a consequential anniversary. We are a generation most blessed and most grateful.

In the Book of Hebrews we read, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the men of old gained approval.” [Hebrews 11:1-2] Do these words not frame our thoughts as we observe and commemorate this day?

Looking backward, we trace the Southern Seminary’s history, not only to 1859 or 1845, but to the eternal purposes and assured promises of God. The writer of the Book of Hebrews has affirmed and elucidated justification by faith alone, and here he turns to affirm faith as central and essential to the experience of the people of God. Faith, in its essence, is the assurance of things hoped for. The hopes of those who founded Southern Seminary were hopes worthy of the people of God. They trusted God to fulfill his promises to his church, and they established this school in order that those promises might be realized in the faithful ministries of those who would serve the church.

By faith, “the men of old gained approval.” We would not be here today, marking and celebrating the sesquicentennial of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, had Almighty God not approved of the vision that brought the school into being and had He not preserved it through countless dangers, toils, and snares. The unprecedented stature and opportunities that mark this school at the present hour are the gift of God to this generation. Of course, this gift is a matter of our most precious stewardship.

Southern Seminary’s sesquicentennial celebration begins and ends in the affirmation of the stewardship that is invested and entrusted to this school and to the Southern Baptist Convention. By faith, the generations that have preceded us gained approval. May God grant to our generation the same faith and even greater faithfulness.

This stewardship requires that we, gathered on this day of commemoration and celebration, commit ourselves anew to the vision, convictions, passions, and pledges that brought this precious school into being. Given the scope of opportunities now before us, we must be even more fervently committed to the Great Commission and the task of reaching the world with the Gospel. We must inspire a new generation with passion for evangelism and the joy of seeing men and women come to a saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. We must train a new generation in the glad calling of the Ministry and in the central tasks of preaching and teaching the Word of God. We must train this generation rightly to divide the Word of truth and arm them to serve without the compromise of truth or integrity. We must strive to prepare a generation to be sensitive shepherds of the flock of God who are also warriors of the Spirit and soldiers of the cross.

In the words of Southern Seminary’s hymn, our vision is to see “soldiers of Christ in truth arrayed.” In our sesquicentennial year, we gratefully and gladly return to the touchstone which brought this school into being.

We stand at the intersection of history and hope, encouraged by legacy and inspired by destiny. May we dedicate ourselves this day to the vision that sustains us, the truth that possesses us, and the legacy that inspires us. By God’s grace, may we, like those who founded this seminary a century and a half ago, find our confidence for the future where alone it can be found — in the assurance of things hoped for.

