

Discerning Leadership: Standing Firm in a Stampede

Gateway Seminary of the Southern Baptist Convention

President's Convocation

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August 28, 2020

Welcome to President's Convocation – video chapel version – for this semester. Thank you for taking time to view this message. Our world is being rocked by a pandemic, social unrest, and political turmoil. In the midst of these challenges, let me speak today on “Discerning Leadership: Standing Firm in a Stampede.”

People of the Book

Baptists, like many other Christians, are well-known for being “people of the book.” We read the Bible, preach from the Bible, memorize Bible passages, write songs based on Bible themes, and hang Bible verses as decorations in our homes. We also like to argue about the Bible, debate what the Bible means, and insist others bend to our interpretations of the Bible. Gateway Seminary takes the Bible seriously. We believe the Bible “has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter” and the Bible “will remain to the end of the world, the true center of Christian union, and the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried.”¹

More than a doctrinal statement defining our institution, we want these statements to resonant through our graduates. We want everyone associated with or produced by Gateway Seminary to be committed to living under biblical authority and bringing a biblical worldview to bear in every life situation.

But here then is the challenge: claiming to be Bible-centered and allowing the Word of God to be the final authority in our lives is easier said than done. Making this claim is often a better bumper sticker than biography.

Beyond our internal sinful drive for autonomy, there are many external reasons for this. The Bible can be a hard book to understand. It speaks to some archaic issues (like women covering their heads) and does not always speak directly to contemporary issues (like cloning). Bible topics also have different interpretations, making it hard to pin down what the Bible means – even for an honest person serious about making it their final authority and guide. Even within our faculty and trustees, and certainly among our students, these differences are frequently evident.

Yet, in spite of these problems, we are still left with the biblical mandate to be a Bible-centered school producing Bible-centered graduates. The Bible says, “All Scripture is inspired by God” (2 Tim. 3:16). Jesus said, “Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35) and warned “Whoever breaks one of the least of these commands and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:19). Surely then, we are compelled to model and teach how the Bible can be foundational to life.

Times Have Changed

When I was a student, accepting the authority of the Bible was about submitting to what it said about various aspects of Christian doctrine or societal practices. For example, during my college days, we debated the doctrine of baptismal regeneration with students from the local Church of Christ university and argued about drinking alcohol with Methodists from their college across town. Those were big issues back then. Those days are long gone!

Today, issues related to biblical authority are more substantive and strike at the core of the biblical revelation. While we once debated finer points of Christian doctrine and discipleship and wore the “right answers” as badges of fidelity, today the debate is over core issues of God’s creative order. Specifically, the crucial conflicts today are about gender roles, sexual identity, family structure, and moral choices. Debates from a previous generation about baptismal modes or acceptable social behavior seem trivial compared to these pressing issues. At stake is not denominational distinctions, but convictions about the foundation of God’s revelation relative to his creation.

For millennia, God’s people have affirmed God’s creative order. God created humans and labeled his creation male and female. Within those constructs, God established patterns of appropriate sexual identity and expression. And, to safeguard those relationships, he established moral boundaries for sexual behavior and healthy family constructs. All of these standards have been accepted as foundational to God’s creative order for millennia – revealed and recorded in both the Old and New Testaments. Aberrations and deviations have also always been acknowledged – and condemned – as less than God’s best for humankind. These teachings have not been, until this generation, considered areas of the Bible that were hard to understand, open to various interpretations, or part of the divisions that exists between denominations. People may not have liked what the Bible declared on these issues, but almost everyone – Christians and non-Christians – generally agreed what it meant. God’s creative order – his biblical plans for gender, sexuality, morality, and family – have enjoyed widespread agreement as God’s revealed Truth for thousands of years.

But not anymore. Today, these foundational convictions are under assault in every quarter – from academicians, entertainers, politicians, religionists, and social activists. It is in

this milieu we must decide what it means to submit to the authority of the Bible and live out its teachings. The difficulty of this challenge cannot be overstated. The reasons for it are manifold and thorny. For today, let me focus on one contemporary problem that complicates the issue of living under biblical authority: the conflation of social justice issues. Then, let me conclude with six suggested steps for personal action on your part.

Conflation of Social Issues

A common method to effect social change – insidious or effective, depending on your perspective – is linking a progressive or controversial change with a right or value held by many. For example, pro-abortion advocates linked ending human life with a woman’s right to choose rooted in a constitutional right to privacy. Freedom of choice and personal privacy are something most people support and linking abortion to those causes gave it legal standing which has resulted in more than 60 million legal abortions in America since 1973.²

Advocates for re-defining sexual morality and mores used a similar strategy when they linked sexual identity to racial identity and made sexual identity a human rights issue. In a similar way, proponents of same-sex marriage linked a re-definition of marriage to freedom of choice – “to love who you love” – and also civil rights by making marriage a civil right rather than a societal construct. Co-mingling abortion with personal privacy, sexuality and marriage with civil rights, and marriage with freedom of choice has been a remarkably effective way to convince many people who would have otherwise opposed these changes to support them.

The most prominent current example of conflating social issues is the social justice organization called Black Lives Matter. Their published agenda is an example of the problem Christians face when sorting out the intermingling of social justice issues. The Black Lives

Matter organization has taken a strong stand against racism and its legacies in all its forms. Most Christians share this position – based on the biblical conviction every person is made in the image of God – and support civil rights for everyone. We are outraged by racist actions, attitudes, policies, and practices. We oppose them and want them stopped. For me, this has been a personal quest for much of my adult life.

For more than 25 years, my life and leadership has been in a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic context. For ten years, I led the Northwest Baptist Convention with churches worshipping every Sunday in 16 languages. For the past 17 years, I have been the President of Gateway Seminary. We have been called, by one national educational leader, “the most multi-cultural seminary in the world.” At Gateway, about 65% of our students are non-Anglo. Our employees also reflect this diversity. We work every day in a diverse environment where people capitalize on, not divide over differences.

Not only do I work in that environment, I live there too. I live in a multi-ethnic California neighborhood where I am a minority. In our neighborhood, Hispanics, Asians, African-Americans, and Anglos live together, play together, watch out for each other, and cooperate to solve problems. We make it work because, once again, while we acknowledge our differences we focus more on what unifies us than divides us.

Besides where we live, we have also chosen to be a minority in our church membership. We have been members of a predominantly African-American church for several years. We joined this church for two reasons – its steadfast and forthright commitment to the Word of God and the opportunity to model relationship-building as Christian leaders.

Opposing racism by living and working among diverse people is not sociological theory for me, it’s daily reality. It has changed the way I think about community, lead an organization,

and worship God. Opposing racism, celebrating diversity, and building communities are part of who I am, how I live, and what we stand for at Gateway Seminary.

Discernment and Decisions

Our convictions about racism and diversity, however, do not justify avoiding the hard reality that aspects of the current anti-racism movement are conflated with some very troubling agendas. The Black Lives Matter organization, for example, is about much more than ending racism. It's stated goals include changing how society defines gender, sexual identity, morality, and family in ways contrary to biblical Truth.

On the Black Lives Matter organization's website are the following declarations:

“We make space for transgender brothers and sisters to participate and lead.”

“We are self-reflexive and do the work required to dismantle cisgender privilege and uplift Black trans folk, especially Black trans women who continue to be disproportionately impacted by trans-antagonistic violence.”

“We disrupt the Western-prescribed nuclear family structure requirement by supporting each other as extended families and ‘villages’ that collectively care for one another, especially our children, to the degree that mothers, parents, and children are comfortable.” (Note the omission of the word “Father” from this list.)

“We foster a queer-affirming network. When we gather, we do so with the intention of freeing ourselves from the tight grip of heteronormative thinking, or rather, the belief that all in the world are heterosexual (unless s/he or they disclose otherwise).”³

The Black Lives Matter organization is working to overcome racism – a worthy goal which aligns with our biblical values. Every Christian should want to live in a country where people are not “judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”⁴ But

Christians submitted to biblical authority are troubled by the conflation of agendas within this organization's founding documents. On one hand, we want to stand against racism and support others who share our outrage. On the other hand, we cannot simultaneously compromise our convictions about so many other issues which strike at the core of what creates healthy relationships, communities, and even countries. The challenge is having the discernment to sort out these issues and the courage to stand up to intense cultural pressure to "join the movement" – no matter the compromises required to participate.

This raises a significant issue for biblical Christians. Can we support secular organizations which often have mixed agendas? The answer is clearly yes. We can support secular organizations with a wide-range of agendas, as long as they do not contradict clear biblical directives. Many secular organizations have altruistic goals Christians can endorse. Cleaning up oceans, providing shoes to poor children, delivering clean water in remote villages, or creating educational opportunities for women in oppressive cultures are all worthy endeavors. These are not necessarily biblical mandates – but here is the crucial issue – neither do they countermand biblical directives. You can partner with secular organizations, support them financially, and provide passionate leadership to their efforts – as long as their goals do not contradict, oppose, undermine, or detract from your commitment to living under biblical authority.

There are multiple organizations and methods for opposing racism, for example, without endorsing the Black Lives Matter organization. Choosing to stand against racism does not mean you must endorse any particular organization or compromise biblical standards to do so. Do not allow culture-shaming, virtue-signaling, social media bullies to intimidate you into

compromising foundational issues of your Christian worldview. The herd may be stampeding in a certain direction but you must have the courage to stand strong.

Personal Action Steps

The pressure on Christian leaders to conform to the culture is more profound today than at any time in my lifetime. If you make the choice to obey God's Word in opposition to cultural demands, you will pay a high price.

You may be publicly shamed. J. K. Rowling, a cultural icon, received serious backlash from her fan base for writing, "erasing the concept of sex removes the ability of many to meaningfully discuss their lives."⁵ Ms. Rowling is not a Christian, but still advocated for preserving sexual identity. Despite her popularity, she was lambasted by her followers.

You may lose your job. Kelvin Cochran, the Fire Chief in Atlanta, Georgia, was fired for expressing his views on traditional marriage in a book he wrote for a men's Bible study at his church.⁶ President Obama had previously lauded Mr. Cochran for being an example of African-American community leadership.⁷ His support of traditional marriage proved devastating. Peter Vlaming, a public school teacher in Virginia, was fired for not using a student's preferred pronoun for their gender choice. His simple conviction that men are men and women are women cost him his career.⁸

Despite these kind of threats, we still must submit to the Bible and allow it to be our standard for living. Here are six suggestions to help you do that – with a special emphasis on addressing the problem of racism.

First, settle the question once for all – absolute Truth exists and is revealed in the Bible. The Bible may be hard to understand, may be open to interpretation, and may need discerning application to modern problems – but decide once for all the Bible is true and you will submit yourself to its authority. While doing so may be a lifelong quest, not doing so assures you of being adrift on a sea of moral and ethical dilemmas without any mooring to keep you stable. If there is no truth, or if your truth and my truth are equally true, or if what’s true is “what’s true for you,” or any other version of post-modern relativism is your position – then you will never have the stable peace that comes from knowing Truth as a foundation for life. Settle this issue. The Bible is my source of absolute truth.

Second, discover orthodox Christian positions and resolve to uphold them – no matter the cost. Study the Bible to discover foundational truths that have been agreed upon by Jews and Christians for millennia. Do not be dissuaded because some issues are open to interpretation, allowing that reality to confuse the issue. There will always be some matters Christians debate in every generation. That does not mean you cannot discover timeless, foundational convictions that have never been questioned and stake your life on those. Make no mistake about the implications of this choice. The cost of upholding biblical convictions in this generation will be a higher price than any time in American history.

Third, be a discerning student of both the Bible and culture. In today’s social media driven environment, extremism reigns. There is little patience for reasoned discussion or nuanced positions. Profanity-laced tirades have displaced logic-based arguments. Sloganeering is used to define tribes with this underlying premise, “You either say what we say and mean what we mean, or you are not one of us and we will destroy you.” Christian leaders must resist this herd mentality and have the courage to think insightfully about what is happening in our culture.

We must take time to evaluate what we see, hear, and read in light of biblical revelation in the context of our Christian worldview. This means you will investigate issues yourself – looking at primary sources, reading what people have actually written, and doing more than viewing an Instagram story and making presumptive conclusions about people, issues, or movements.

Fourth, take personal steps to build cross-cultural, multi-ethnic, or multi-racial relationships. Follow my lead. Move to a diverse community. Join a church where you are a minority. Get involved in ministries that are intentionally diverse. Stop trumpeting your supposed outrage on social media and do something concrete, specific, and intentional to build relationships with different kinds of people.

The best organization for building those relationships is the church. While we are not perfect in opposing racism or promoting diversity – and critics love to point out our shortcomings – Christianity is still the most diverse religion in the world. Christians of all races work together, either in multi-ethnic churches or in mono-ethnic churches networked as denominations. Why is the church such an important voice in confronting racism? Because the church visibly expresses the spiritual reality “there is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female; since you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). Today, our world is crying out for peace between different races. The best they can hope to achieve is *détente* – absence of conflict resulting from focusing on the common good. Real peace is elusive because it can only come through inner transformation resulting in spiritual unity. In Jesus Christ, we have found the Person who transforms us, unifies us, and gives us the capacity to rise above our selfishness and prejudice.

Fifth, as part of rising above self-focused consideration of these issues, we must also move beyond our America-centric consideration of the global problem of racism. Americans

tend to think we have the best or worst of everything and our problems should be all-consuming. A global Christian organization like Gateway – and the leaders we produce – must model a better way by maintaining a global perspective on this problem. Racism – often tinged with religious persecution – is being expressed through sexual violence, ethnic cleansing, and genocide around the world. Consider these recent examples.

The Rohingya, a Muslim people group in Myanmar, are being attacked by the Buddhist majority. More than 24,000 people have been killed and some estimate at least 750,000 out of one million Rohingya have fled across the border to Bangladesh for safety.⁹

The Dinkas and the Nuer are killing each other in South Sudan. While the Dinkas, with governmental support, are generally the aggressors there is ample evidence both sides are committing atrocities against the other. Nearly 400,000 people have been killed since December 2013 in South Sudan's civil war.¹⁰

In Sudan, Arab-militia backed by governmental forces have attacked the Darfuris. Since 2014 at least 500,000 people have been displaced¹¹ and as of 2013, 300,000 people have been killed.¹² There are still 300,000 Darfur refugees living in United Nations sponsored camps.¹³

The situation in Syria, despite recent coalition victories over ISIS, remains chaotic. Yazidis have been brutally attacked – including gang rapes and mass murders – and displaced from their traditional homeland. There are about 280,000 people living in refugee camps.¹⁴

Finally, China denies persecuting the Uighurs, but the evidence is too strong to deny.¹⁵ Mass incarcerations, forced sterilizations and other forms of birth control, and other attempts to destroy this Muslim-minority have been credibly reported.

These are just five examples. Racism is currently expressing itself through rapes, murders, insurrections, and open warfare in multiple cultures and countries. Racism is a global

problem. As Christian leaders with a global worldview, we must denounce racism in all its forms and in all locations. We must avoid the common America-centric mistake of thinking our problems are the most important global issues.

According to the Washington Post's database, there have been 124 unarmed Black persons killed by police since 2015.¹⁶ Every one of those deaths is a tragedy and must not be trivialized. Black lives do matter. But these numbers pale in comparison to the hundreds of thousands of victims of racially and religiously motivated violence around the world. If we believe every person is made in the image of God – and we do – then our passion for justice and demands for action must extend beyond our local or national borders. Our outrage should be expressed in some proportion to the scope of the global problem. If you are a student at Gateway, we are preparing you to be a global leader with a global perspective making a global impact.

Finally, prepare for a hard road and trust God to sustain you. The Bible predicts the world will become more hostile to Christians, not more affirming, as time goes by. Do not despair! Trust God to sustain and advance his kingdom – not your life, community, culture, or country. The Bible promises, in the midst of cultural conflict, God's kingdom will endure. Our kingdoms do not. A common phrase used today for culture-shaming is, "Be sure you are on the right side of history." While that phrase sounds threatening, it really is good counsel. The right side of history is allegiance to God, his Word, and his Kingdom. Life is short. Heaven is long. Someday, when all that seems so important right now is a footnote in eternity – you will be glad you endured whatever hardships may come your way to obey the God who created and sustains all that is, ever was, and ever will be.

Conclusion

Every generation must answer the same question faced by a couple in a garden a long time ago. The serpent asked Eve, “Has God said?” How you answer that question, just as it did for Adam and Eve, will determine your destiny. We believe and affirm 1 Peter 1:24-25, “All flesh is like grass, and all its glory like a flower of the grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord endures forever.”

God has spoken. We believe that and we will live it – no matter how hard it may be. May God sustain us by the power of his Spirit and his authoritative Word.

Endnotes

- ¹ Baptist Faith and Message 2000, Article I.
- ² Report by National Right to Life Educational Foundation. 2017. <https://nrlc.org/uploads/factsheets/FS01AbortionintheUS.pdf>
- ³ <https://blacklivesmatter.com/what-we-believe/> Accessed August 11, 2020.
- ⁴ Martin Luther King Jr., "I have a Dream," 1963. <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkihaveadream.htm>
- ⁵ Shennan, July 2020. <https://www.edinburghnews.scotsman.com/arts-and-culture/books/jk-rowling-twitter-why-harry-potter-author-has-been-accused-transphobia-2877977>
- ⁶ "Atlanta Fire Chief: I was Fired because of my faith" <https://www.foxnews.com/opinion/atlanta-fire-chief-i-was-fired-because-of-my-christian-faith>.
- ⁷ Eric Sturgus, "Obama picks Atlanta chief for nation's top fire post," 2012. <https://www.ajc.com/news/local/obama-picks-atlanta-chief-for-nation-top-fire-post/jg9WHGWgh8tmleGmbqsV4L/>
- ⁸ David Roach, "Teacher's Lawsuit Reflects Evangelical Educators' Dilemma Over Transgender Pronouns," 2019. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2019/october/va-teacher-fired-transgender-pronouns-dilemma.html>
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- ¹¹ International Crises Group: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/sudan/chaos-darfur>
- ¹² Al Jazeera (2013): <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2013/11/un-displaced-violence-darfur-20131114132610566629.html#:~:text=The%20UN%20estimates%20as%20many,toll%20has%20been%20grossly%20inflated>.

- ¹³ UNHCR, 2018: <https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2018/4/5ad9a4604/first-darfur-refugee-returns-from-chad.html>.
- ¹⁴ Benjamin Bathke, 2019: <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/18508/yazidi-refugees-in-germany-suffer-severely-from-2014-genocide-study-says>. See Middle East Research Institute's report, *The Yazidis: Perceptions of Reconciliation and Conflict*, 2017, on the aftermath of the invasion of ISIS. The genocide occurred in 2014 but ISIS has been pushed back from these people.
- ¹⁵ BBC News (July 2020): <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-53463403>.
- ¹⁶ Washington Post, 2020: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/investigations/police-shootings-database/>; accessed August 13, 2020.