

## SAMFORD UNIVERSITY

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### **Introduction**

This assignment has turned out to be a challenge for me, especially in light of the presentations and discussions we heard yesterday, but of course I have to go ahead and give it a try. The situation reminds me of a story told by Brooks Hays, a congressman from Arkansas in the mid-twentieth century. A woman was on trial for killing her husband, and her attorney decided to put her on the stand. When her attorney finished questioning her, the prosecutor began:

“Madam, were you present when your husband died?”

“Yes.”

“Did you hear your husband’s last words?”

“Yes.”

“Were your husband’s last words addressed to you?”

“Yes.”

“What were your husband’s last words?”

“My husband said, ‘Go ahead and shoot. You couldn’t hit the side of a barn.’”

I’ll go ahead and shoot.

### **The Community of People**

I believe that Samford’s greatest strength is its people. You might even say that the people are the university. At the first faculty meeting at Columbia University over which Dwight Eisenhower presided, he expressed his appreciation for the opportunity of meeting those who worked for the university, to which one of the senior faculty responded, “Mr. President, the faculty are Columbia

University.”<sup>i</sup>

We routinely speak of Samford as a community. The Scottish philosopher John MacMurray has suggested that communities be distinguished from societies. A society is a group of persons who are working together on a common task, for example, a group of people who work for an insurance company. A community is a group of people who are together because they care about each other, for example, a family.<sup>ii</sup>

On that analysis, Samford is a society. We have in common that each of us is making his or her contribution to the common task of higher education. It is remarkable, though, I think, how often we edge over into community and become people who are together because we care about each other.

Samford tends to be a reasonably peaceable community. Where there is competition, it is usually of the constructive rather than the destructive sort. We wish each other well; we want each other to succeed. Like all institutions of higher education, students, faculty, and administrators at Samford are sometimes tempted to think of each other as mortal enemies, but most of us seem to be able to resist the temptation most of the time. So far as I’m aware, no administrator at Samford is pleased when a faculty member fails to receive tenure or promotion, and no faculty member takes pleasure in giving students failing grades.

A challenge we face as a community is to extend hospitality to people who are different. Hospitality is a Christian practice, though of course not exclusively Christian. Nowadays we tend to think that welcoming our own families home for the holidays is an act of hospitality, and in a sense it is. But the test of hospitality comes when we meet the stranger, the other. Are Samford students hospitable towards students who are different—toward students who are, for examples, bohemian, or unchurched, or poor, or Calvinistic, or anti-Calvinistic? Are faculty hospitable toward students who

seem to have been spoiled or who are struggling to pass a course which is famously easy? One of our challenges is to become very hospitable to strangers.

### **The Campus**

A second strength of Samford is this lovely campus on which we do our work. If Samford ends up being the last institution of higher education in the region doing virtually all its work at one location, it may be in part because the location is so pleasant. I see this as a strength. I'm sure that our beautiful campus helps us attract and retain faculty as well as students.

The campus can be a challenge, too. We all are hoping that the new parking pavilion will meet the longstanding need for more parking spaces. I want to offer a suggestion about classrooms. I want to suggest that Samford consider initiating a program to replace the student desks in the classrooms—the desks with one arm and a board for writing—with adult furniture. I think this would signal that we respect our students as adults and expect them to act like adults.

### **The Supporters and the Endowment**

A third strength of Samford is that it has generous financial supporters and a healthy endowment. Years ago an acquaintance who had been president of two institutions of higher education told me that a university is like a black hole into which you can throw as much money as you can ever raise and it will disappear. He didn't intend to be cynical, just realistic. But, of course the money doesn't really disappear—it goes into scholarships and salaries and buildings and many other things that make a university function.

An obvious challenge is to encourage giving and to grow the endowment. It also is a challenge to allocate the available funds as justly as possible, especially with reference to salaries. Perfect justice in salaries may not be possible, but it is possible to avoid extreme injustice. Samford administrators

face a challenge in having to work to insure that the market is not the sole factor determining the setting of salaries.

### **The Commitment to Academic Rigor**

A fourth strength of Samford is the commitment, which so far as I can tell is universal, continually to ratchet up the level of academic work. This commitment is evident in the process of faculty acquisition and in the programs for faculty development. It will always be a challenge to honor this commitment.

I believe there are two other challenges related to the commitment. One is the challenge of appreciating the diverse kinds of academic work being done here. It has to be a challenge for a biologist to understand why two class sessions must be devoted to a poem by George Herbert, or for a musician to understand why students need to learn multiple forms of physical exercise, and so on. The risk we face is that we look upon each other's disciplines with contempt. It is a challenge to appreciate both practical and theoretical subjects. It is a challenge to appreciate faculty writing for both popular and specialized audiences.

The other challenge associated with our commitment to academic work is that it should not be achieved at the expense of our Christian mission. What makes it realistic to say that we intend to nurture persons for God and for learning is it is not necessary to neglect the first in order to accomplish the second.

But negotiating the two can be a challenge. Let me speak about my discipline. How do I speak with candor about the formation of the canon of Scripture, without making students feel that their faith in the Bible is being threatened? How do I assure them that a full understanding of the human character of the Bible will not detract from a full appreciation of divine character of its message?

How do I communicate to students that it is possible both to probe the Bible for answers to our best questions, which is what historical-critical study is, and also to listen with humility when the Bible is being read as *lectio divina*, the Word of God for the people of God?

I mention the Bible because that is a subject with which I am familiar. I assume the same sort of thing applies to other subjects. How do we explain how markets work without suggesting that human beings are nothing more than consumers and producers? How do we teach the horrors of the Inquisition without subverting students' faith that the church sometimes contributes to the well-being of society? How do we display human behavior in psychological or sociological categories without depriving students of moral categories for human behavior? How do we unpack the evidence for the evolution of life on our planet without making students feel their faith in the Creator is being threatened?

Honoring the commitment continually to ratchet up the level of academic work at Samford requires wisdom and hard work.

### **The Christian Mission**

This brings me to my final subject, namely, that Samford is a Christian university.

If we look to the Bible to understand how to use the word *Christian*, we find a couple of surprises. One is that the word appears just three times in the Bible, twice as a singular noun, once as a plural noun, and never as an adjective. The Bible offers no guidance about how to use the word *Christian* adjectively.

Today we use the noun and adjective differently. Consider the noun: If I ask, "Am I a Christian?", my response is affirmative; I am a Christian. But if I ask, "Am I Christian?", my response is quite different; the most I can say is that I have made a commitment to live and to think

as a Christian, and I am trying to honor that commitment. This suggests that the adjective denotes values and behavior to which we aspire and to which, at least in principle, people may aspire who would not use the noun of themselves. A humorous example of this occurred in the 1960s when Ross Barnett was running for governor of Mississippi; during the campaign he spoke at a synagogue, where he addressed the congregation as “all you fine Christian people.”

In view of the fact that the Bible does not use the word *Christian* as an adjective, and in view of the long discussion and the vast literature about what it means to be a Christian university, I want to propose that the phrase *Christian university* is what the political philosopher W. B. Gallie called an “essentially contested concept.” In a famous article published fifty years ago, Gallie pointed out that concepts such as art, science, religion, and democracy are used by people in very different ways. When speaking about these concepts it is inappropriate to be either dogmatic (“my understanding of the concept is right and yours isn’t”), or skeptical (“all understandings are equally true or false”), or eclectic (“each understanding gives a partial view, so the more the better”). The proper use of essentially contested concepts, according to Gallie, is to dispute them indefinitely.<sup>iii</sup> I think that the phrase *Christian university* is an essentially contested concept.

I want also to propose that the fact that Samford is a Christian university is a strength. It is a Christian university in that a community of Christian people—in this case, some Baptists in Alabama 165 years ago—founded the school as part of their effort to live the way that Jesus taught. Jesus taught that greatness consists in service. One set of values tells us that our worth depends on how many people serve us; Jesus told us that our worth depends on how many people we serve. To be great in his community, you must be a servant of all.<sup>iv</sup> Alabama Baptists founded Samford to be of service to students, to society, and to the Christian church. Samford today continues to provide an

education which enriches students' lives, equips them to earn a living, and empowers them to contribute to the well-being of society. That's why we can truthfully say of Samford that the world will be better for it.

To be a Christian university in this sense is one of Samford's strengths. It also is a challenge and an opportunity because the Christian character of Samford can make us uneasy. I noticed this while reading applications for promotion and tenure during fourteen years I served on the university committee on faculty development and evaluation. When the subject was the three-legged stool—teaching, scholarship, and service—every application without exception was filled with enthusiastic language. But when the subject was the Christian mission of the university, some applications contained enthusiastic language but others contained more subdued language, such as, “I am comfortable with the Christian mission of the university.”

At first I found this puzzling, but soon I came to think of it as an expression of an understandable concern that the commitment to be a Christian university may be interpreted as a commitment to Fundamentalism with its tendencies toward anti-intellectualism, dogmatism, legalism, self-righteousness, suspicion, fear, anger, mean-spiritedness, and divisiveness. To their great credit, Fundamentalist leaders such as Jerry Falwell in his autobiography and Ed Dobson and Ed Hindson in their fine book *The Fundamentalist Phenomenon* have candidly admitted that their movement must deal with problems such as these.

We live in a time when fundamentalism is flourishing in different religions across the world, and at Samford we live in a region where Protestant Christianity is the dominant religion and where Fundamentalism is a visible form of Protestantism. It is understandable that our setting, and our determination to distance ourselves from Fundamentalism and its attendant problems, make some of

us reluctant to emphasize the Christian mission of our university.

What is needed is for us to be clear ourselves and to communicate clearly to our students and others that Samford is not a Fundamentalist school, and neither is it a secular school. This is a challenge, because some people find it difficult to conceive that there is any middle ground between secularism and Fundamentalism. One of our tasks as educators is to map the middle ground and to help people understand that it is large and inviting and a good place to be, both for individuals and for a university.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, our community of people, our pleasant campus, our healthy financial resources, our commitment continually to improve our academic work, and our Christian mission—these seem to me to be five of Samford’s strengths, and also to present some of its challenges and opportunities.

### **Endnotes**

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1. <http://www.rpi.edu/dept/facsen/2004-2005/Minutes/12-15-2004Minutes.htm>.

ii. John MacMurray, *Persons in Relation* (Amherst, New York: Humanity Books, 1999 [1961]), chs. VI-VII.

iii. W. B. Gallie, *Philosophy and the Historical Understanding* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1964).

iv. Mark 10:44-45.