

## **Omnia Autem Probate: Quod Bonum est Tenete<sup>1</sup>**

### ***Personal Context***

Nineteen years ago this month, while giving a paper at a conference, I was recruited to UAB. My wife, Mary Lyn, seven months pregnant with our first child, Drew, accompanied me on that August trip. Six months later we moved to Birmingham with our four month old son in tow. At three universities, spanning twenty-five years, I have watched the annual happening that we will all see repeated once again later this week: parents assisting their sons and daughters with the transition to college and into a new life stage. Last week Mary Lyn and I helped Drew move away to college. Many of you, too, have been through this gut-wrenching experience; no doubt others of you have imagined yourself in this situation as you watched the recent Lowe's commercial on television. I am ashamed to admit that it took this single, very personal moment in our family life to significantly, but positively, adjust my perspective on what I am doing here at Samford; I surely will see this fall's influx of parents and students from an entirely fresh perspective. I want the faculty, staff and administrators at my son's university to take him seriously, as a person and not just as a student; I want only the best facilities, academic programs and experiences for Drew's intellectual, emotional, social and spiritual development, and I trust my colleagues at his institution to be the catalysts for his growth. Samford parents expect no less from you and me; what a humbling responsibility.

By all objective academic barometers I was successful at UAB. Then, one of those pivotal life events occurred that started me on the road to, at least superficially, understanding the distinction between job and vocation<sup>2</sup> (something Samford has been exploring for several years now). On the evening of July 10, 1991 L' Express flight 508 crashed on its approach to the Birmingham International Airport killing thirteen; only the pilot and a local attorney survived.

Following a long hospitalization I heard, by chance, the attorney tell the story of his experience. After reciting the horrifying details of the crash this man, by all accounts a devout Christian, described how he lay recuperating in a hospital bed for months with survivor's guilt contemplating how God could allow him to survive such a catastrophe while simultaneously permitting his close friend, a devoted father and husband, to die beside him. His conclusion? God created a universe with all of its marvelous natural laws and *random processes*, set it in motion, and now sits back observing in a strictly executive capacity. This event had transformed a mainstream Christian into an Enlightenment-style deist. I was unexpectedly provoked by this man and his story; for the first time as a statistician I was forced to consider how some of my professional concerns, particularly stochastic and probabilistic processes, inform and are informed by my Christian faith. UAB is primarily a research institution and I wanted to begin to more deeply, more intellectually, explore this intersection between chance and my Christian faith. Soon thereafter, however, I was informed by my school Dean during my annual performance review that my desire to explore a *theology of chance* was an inappropriate track to add to my research program; as a result of this, among others difficulties, my wife and I decided that it was time for me to leave UAB. Two years later I had the great good fortune to join the faculty of this university.

### ***Cultural Context***

Public and private universities alike, reflecting cultural trends as they do, have become entangled in a seemingly ubiquitous web of political correctness. The point was driven home for me this summer when I took my kids to see *Superman Returns*; as a childhood fan of the TV superman, George Reeves, I went to the theater to experience pure escapism. I smiled as Perry White exclaimed, "Great Caesar's ghost!" and laughed as Perry, Lois and Jimmy pointed at a

photograph and uttered that famous line, "It's a bird, it's plane, it's Superman." But when Perry White asked if Superman still stood for, "truth, justice..." then trailed away into silence rather than concluding with "*and the American way*" I was jolted back to reality wondering whether this was a subtle political statement, an attempt to improve the film's foreign sales, or simply the paranoia of a rapidly aging, culturally out-of-touch and oversensitive nostalgic white American male.

A theme running through Richard Hughes' book, *How Christian Faith Can Sustain the Life of the Mind*,<sup>3</sup> is his belief that a Christian university should enable its faculty to operate with greater academic freedom (greater than secular private and public universities) precisely because of its Christian mission, not in spite of it. That is, despite the conventional wisdom of many of our colleagues at secular institutions, Christian universities should be less, not more, constrained by such cultural headwinds as political correctness. Where else but at a Christian university should *nearly* every point of view have a place at the table in the intellectual commons. After all, we are in the business of discovering truth, whether revealed through Scripture, through science, or through the arts and humanities. As *Christians* it is critical to understand that this is not limited to our academic discipline but that "[a]n unexamined faith is not a faith. It is a superstition."<sup>4</sup> In the past I have stated publicly that in many ways I have had, in fact, greater academic freedom at Samford than at the state institutions with which I have been associated; some of you have recoiled at this assertion. I readily admit that there are enclaves of intellectual oppression at all colleges and universities, and Samford is no exception.

In the time I have remaining, let me draw attention to two areas that I see as our greatest strengths and yet simultaneously present our most formidable challenges as Samford advances

into the twenty-first century – maintaining and enhancing academic integrity while championing intellectual freedom all within the context of a distinctively Christian university.

### *A University Still in its Ascendancy*

In one of my first Faculty Workshops I remember President Cortis, in his address to the faculty, express his conviction that Samford is a university still in its ascendancy. After thirteen years at this place, I am convinced that he was correct in his assessment. In one hundred and sixty-five years Samford has evolved into (or, maybe I should say, has been intelligently designed to be) a complex institution of eight schools and colleges with twenty-six programs offering over eighty majors – a remarkable achievement in the contemporary higher education market when one considers that our student/faculty ratio has remained respectable. But how do we improve on something already as precious as Samford University? I want to suggest that it is time for an intellectual Cambrian Explosion on this campus and in this state.

### *A Samford/Alabama Renaissance*

In his 1990 Occasional Paper entitled, "Toward Samford as a Christian University: A Sesquicentennial Proposal," Provost Dr. Bill Hull said this in reference to making "Samford a distinctive Christian university in its academic life"<sup>5</sup>:

Should it [that is, an effort to reinvigorate the academic enterprise without marginalizing Christianity] be launched with suitable fanfare, be given attractive facilities, underwritten with generous budgets, and staffed with "star" faculty? Or should it begin slowly, work unobtrusively, and function incognito more as a commoner than as a queen of the curriculum? The former approach has the advantage of sending a clear signal to the religious constituency that Samford University intends to take with utmost seriousness

its Christian mandate. The latter approach has the advantage of requiring the case for Christian academics to be made on its own merits without an authoritarian boost from above in the form of administrative patronage.<sup>6</sup>

Dr. Hull argues for the latter "bottom-up" approach. I find his proposal remarkably prescient given that it appears to me that our sister institution, Baylor University, seems to have adopted the former "top-down" approach to reform in its Baylor 2012 plan with arguably less than optimal results.

I hold the old-fashioned (some would say naive) notion that the seat of power and authority in a university rests with its faculty. As Dr. Hull implied over sixteen years ago, significant reform that takes "the Christian dimension to the heart of the learning process"<sup>7</sup> must come from the bottom up, from the faculty. Samford University is an outstanding institution, still in its ascendancy. We can make a convincing case for being the university of Alabama with strong ties to the grassroots of this state and region, most notably through the Baptist faith. It is time to take this university to the next level and I offer the following challenges for our consideration:

- 1) Samford University has an impressive physical presence; the body is strong and getting stronger with the necessary additions and renovations currently underway and on the drawing board. As a foundation for the future, I would challenge university officers to call for a full court press to endow the remaining unnamed schools and to pay for current and planned projects in a timely manner and see that the maintenance and improvement of the campus infrastructure is adequately underwritten for future generations.
- 2) I was recently told by university fund raisers that donors prefer giving to bricks and

mortar over academic programs. No doubt this is true as I learned first hand last spring as I tried to raise \$15,000 in extramural matching funds for a grant proposal prepared by the *Science and Christianity Cadre*. I have to believe, however, that there exist individuals, groups and foundations among our constituencies that will draw strength and satisfaction from supporting the academic and intellectual vision enlivened by the Samford University community. I pledge to you and the officers of this institution to do all within my power to work with University Relations (e.g., meet with potential donors, speak to groups of constituencies) to assist in identifying these visionaries among our extended family. My hope is that you will join me in that effort. With faith that these academic venture capitalists, in fact, exist, I call on the Provost's office (with the approval of the President) to convene a task force consisting of faculty, students, staff, alumni and administrators charged with configuring the largest capital campaign in our university's history with the express purpose of attracting restricted funds intended to initially buttress but ultimately enhance the academic infrastructure of our university. These funds would underwrite such things as:

- a) an academic venture capitalist fund to provide financial resources for innovative teaching and scholarship (e.g., public forums on critical social issues that model civil discourse and exemplify the best aspects of academic freedom, release time for experimentation with such innovative teaching strategies as Oxbridge tutoring, seed money for promising scholarship, lecture series, and badly needed library resources, to name but a few).
- b) HOPE-type scholarships (tuition, fees, books, room, board and stipend) to attract

*more* than our share of the best students in Alabama, the southeast and the U.S.

- c) *adequate* endowments for chairs across the university, particularly in Arts and Sciences. With all of its schools and colleges, programs and majors, highly ranked Samford University may be justifiably criticized as being a mile wide and an inch deep. While we promote ourselves as a liberal arts university, in fact, the professional schools "tail" wags the "Arts and Sciences" dog. We have a truly outstanding Arts and Sciences faculty and by all rights they should be the strongest unit at this university, the hub of the wagon wheel from which the radiating professional schools draw strength.
- d) study centers and centers of excellence that contribute to the intellectual growth and development of students, faculty, staff, administrators, alumni and the citizens of Alabama alike.
- e) international study centers maintained and funded in a manner worthy of carrying the name of Samford University.
- f) a distinctive honors program that is not operated on a shoestring but rather is forced to turn away excellent students in favor of exceptional students.
- g) the institutionalization of student and faculty cadre groups that provide forums for the modeling of civil discourse and debate on the most challenging social, spiritual, cultural and intellectual issues of our time.
- h) the development of ground-breaking initiatives to reconnect with the people of Alabama, such as we are currently doing in Perry County. What about Alabama cadres? Imagine if Samford University would annually "adopt" a town (or towns) in Alabama, provide a particular book of Christian and/or cultural interest to a

significant number of citizens who voluntarily express an interest in participating and then send students and faculty to conduct periodic cadre meetings where cutting edge issues can be discussed in depth from multiple perspectives?

Samford's mission has been summarized in the slogan, "We nurture persons: for God, for learning, forever." As we continue the discussion of our commitment to the Christian sustenance of the life of the mind, Paul's nurturing words to the new converts in his first letter to the church at Thessalonica seem appropriate. He admonishes the new converts not to accept all prophecies at face value but rather encourages them to, "Test everything; hold on to the good."<sup>8</sup> As we work together to ensure the continued ascendancy of this university, surely these inspired words should guide us as we consider the important issues of academic challenge, academic integrity, and intellectual liberty; let's test *everything*, absolutely everything, and hold on to the good.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Thessalonians 5:21, "Test everything; hold on to the good." (NIV)

<sup>2</sup> Job - "A regular activity performed for payment; a position in which one is employed;" Vocation – "An occupation, especially one for which a person is particularly suited; a calling." (*The American Heritage Dictionary*, third edition. New York: Dell Publishing, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> Richard Hughes, *How Christian Faith Can Sustain the Life of the Mind*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001).

<sup>4</sup> Garry Wills, *Why I Am a Catholic*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002): 6.

<sup>5</sup> William E. Hull, "Toward Samford as a Christian University: A Sesquicentennial Proposal," *Samford University Occasional Papers of the Provost* 4 (1990): 2.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>8</sup> 1 Thessalonians 5:21.