Belhaven College

Kickoff Banquet – August 14, 2001

Dr. Roger Parrott, President of the College

Verse of the Year 2001-02

"Don't copy the behavior of this world, but let God transform you."

Romans 12:2

God has called us together -- to prepare men and women academically and spiritually to serve Christ Jesus in their careers, in human relationships, and in the world of ideas.

Yet the students who will come to us this year have grown up in a world where the overarching cultural shapers run counter to the objectives of our mission statement.

In a simpler time, it was the converging rivers of:

1. wholesome stable families
2. Bible believing churches
3. entertainment which held up heroes as ideals
4. and value based educational systems

that carried students to the doorstep of a college which could then take great pride in putting on the finishing touches.

But today, our students have only known a world where:

1. family stability is the exception rather than the rule
2. churches rewrite theology according to opinion polls
3. the entertainment industry worships "tolerance at all costs"
4. and schools need values even more than metal detectors.

Then these students come to us -- some with parents pleading eyes that say – save my family from such a world.

And let's be frank – sometimes we want to throw up our hands in defeat, or better yet throw out the bad ones in hope of salvaging a few who happen to have been fortunate enough to have been pulled into the left-over trickle of that river of an earlier time.

Our task is overwhelming – because our culture is overwhelming.

Just focus the viewfinder of life across the landscape, and it is much more likely that one's gaze with fall on the filth of the culture, rather than the quality that God intended.

1) You will see a culture that has so desensitized people to gruesome violence that gore has become the focus of entertainment.

2) You will see leaders who have exchanged their trust for their temptations.

3) You will see desperate poor who are totally ignored while the wealthy collect treasures for their private pleasure.

4) You will see vast networks of people whose only common link is their sexual perversion.

5) You will see religious leaders who are more concerned about status than salvation.

6) You will see a stratification of society that has become so comfortable devaluating life that the killing of unwanted children is encouraged.

7) You will see truth as a moving target, and anyone who speaks for the absolutes of right and wrong being ridiculed and attacked.

The filth is overwhelming – and it is out of all this that students must be pulled, cleaned off, and then educated.

But I am not just describing our culture of today – it was to Christians in a city, with these characteristics, that God said through the Apostle Paul in the year 58:

Don't copy the behavior of this world, but let God transform you

We tend to think that the world in which we live is as bad as it gets. But sit in Dr. Waibel's Church History class for a few days and discover that today's decadent and selfish culture is pale in comparison to the time of Christ and the early Church.

God promised the Romans that out of the distortions of the world's behavior, Christ can, and will, transform his people.

And today, while the behavior of the world seems to have spiraled out of control, God's promise is just as fresh – he will transform us. He will transform you, and me → and he will transform our students.

Coming out of the muck of our culture, students desperately need Belhaven's education – that teaches a World and Life view that honors Christ. They need to understand and experience how God is at work in every aspect of their lives, and how serving him is the only path to quality living. Students need to see, and have modeled for them, how our faith in Christ must be integrated into every activity of life, and how faith never needs to be compartmentalized.

And the Lord has allowed Belhaven to be a significant instrument in developing students who have become God honoring alumni.

But our greatest caution is that our educational process must never become centered in OUR ability to change students, rather than in God who does the transforming. The temptation of Christian Colleges, which is the point that begins their downfall, is in trusting their own cleverness, rather than a total reliance on God to transform.

Our curriculum, programs, activities – as outstanding as they are and as effective as you all have proven to be – are totally insignificant in comparison to God's transforming power.

As much as we might wish it, Belhaven College cannot transform the behavior the world has created. Rather, only as we trust God to do the transformation, can he then use us to teach and mentor students in how to think, live, behave, and mature in Christ.

My friends and coworkers, we are not simply in the education business. We are on the front line of ministry against a culture that appears to have all the advantages on its side.

But we serve a God whose transformation is so powerful and complete, that Paul said in an earlier part of this letter to the Romans, (taken from the New Living Translation): "nothing can ever separate us from his love. … Our fears for today, our worries about tomorrow, and even the powers of hell can't keep God's love away."

Let's begin this school year praying for Christ to transform

- every student – for it is only after His transformation that our educational process has any hope of becoming effective,

And we must begin this school year praying for Christ to transform

- every faculty and staff member – for it is only through the Lord's strength that we can bring the mind, heart, and hands of Jesus to our students.

So as we begin this new school year, I want to call us again to the foundations which have made Belhaven College an oasis among the sea of colleges that have embraced the behavior of the world.

And I would ask you to evaluate afresh your work in light of four specific demands that surround our verse of the year.

Whether you teach the class, or clean the classroom, God has brought you here for HIS work. And he will use us for his glory when we refuse to copy the behavior of the world as well as copy the pattern of most of higher education.

First, the scripture calls us to be Consecrated

Romans chapter 12 begins, "I plead with you to give your bodies to God. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice – the kind he will accept. When you think of what he has done for you, is this too much to ask?"

God will never waste a consecrated life, so the only place to begin our school year is at the alter of personal consecration. As we commit our work at Belhaven College to him, God will transform us so that we can be used in ways that far outreach anything we can imagine ourselves.

But God doesn't transform us as an organization – the transformation is personal and comes in my life and your life. Thus, we will only reach our potential as a college when each one of us consecrates our life, our work, and each day of our service at Belhaven to Christ.

In full time Christian work, we must be especially careful, for it is easy for us to slide into a spiritualized version of the world's behavior. We can begin to arrogantly believe we are loaning to God our talents, at some sort of discount rate – as if we are doing a favor for the Lord of all creation.

Instead, if you and I want to serve Christ Jesus through Belhaven College, we must never forget that our genuine effectiveness begins only at the point we consecrate ourselves, and our work, totally to

God. And he can then use us significantly, when we rely on his transforming power instead of our own strength.

I heard a marvelous quote a few weeks ago from Gordon Crosby, pastor of Church of the Savior in Washington DC. He said, "One question that must be asked of any prospective pastor: 'are you weak enough to be our pastor.'

When we hire, we are always looking for the most experienced, the best prepared, the proven track record, and certainly, the strongest people we can find. But while all those qualities are important, if we believe our own press releases, and trust in our strengths rather than God, we cannot minister in His name.

We need to join in the testimony of Paul as he writes in Second Corinthians: *Since I know it is all for Christ's good, I am quite content with my weaknesses. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*

Let us ask ourselves, are we weak enough to do the job that God has given us at Belhaven College? In other words, do we desperately need God in order to do what is our responsibility, or can we manage it just fine on our own strengths and skills?

Let me ask it a different way:

- Do you feel overwhelmed by the responsibility God has given you?
  - If not, then you are not trusting God for the significant opportunities that have far reaching value.

- Do you feel inadequate to handle the pressure of all you do?
  - If not, you're not trusting for Godly results.

- Do you feel unsure about how God is going to use you next in the daily routine of interaction with students and with each other?
  - If not, then you are not stretching to be God's minister among us.

All this doesn't mean we should ignore the gifts God has given us, or that we don't make plans to build on our advantages, or find ways to cope with the to do list and stresses of our work.

But it does mean, if we are going to keep from copying the behavior of the world, and are committed to doing education differently →

We cannot just be <u>CAPABLE</u>.
Instead we need to be <u>TRUSTING</u>.

You see, if we rely on our strengths to do good things at Belhaven College, God will allow us to do ONLY the little bit we can make happen on our own. And while trusting in our own competencies may produce some pleasing results, we will fall far short of the significant ministry God would like to achieve through us.

So are you weak enough to do your job? Is the work God is asking you to do of such significance that relying on the Lord is your only option?

I'm thrilled that we each have skills, experience, and achievements we could boost about on the world's scale of success. And I'm amazed at the quality of faculty and staff that God has brought to us, for I enjoy the opportunity to brag on you often. In fact, I would aggressively argue that, probably in Belhaven's entire history, overall, we have never had more experienced and qualified people in every position than we do right now.

But the third verse of Romans chapter 12 says, "Be honest in your estimate of yourselves, measuring your value by how much faith God has given you." Our value in God's work is measured on the yardstick of faith, not by our resume. God doesn't care as much about the gifts we bring to the table, as he does about who we are at the table.

I am convinced that it is this type of reliance on God to carry us that has been the hallmark of Belhaven these past few years. And because of our trusting him for an uncertain future, the Lord has brought us through a period of incredible growth and new opportunities.

But as we continue to become stronger on the traditional measurements of College success, we also become tempted to copy the behavior of the world and trust in our own track record, rather than the creator God.

Will you join me in fully consecrating again our work to God's Glory and allow the Lord Jesus to unleash the seen, and unseen, ministry opportunities among us that we never imagined possible?

This dramatically different starting point for higher education will only be possible if we are willing to avoid copying the behavior of most colleges that assumes it's their teaching, coaching, and mentoring that does the transforming, rather than God. And further, higher education's traditional behavior tells us that our campus culture should include accentuated power differentials, fault finding gossip, hierarchical class distinctions, critical cynicism, and agenda motivated coalition building.

But when we have a vision for ministry, rather than traditional higher education, we can't afford to copy the behavior of this world – because the eternal stakes are far too high to rely on the dysfunctional culture of the academy.

And what a joy we experience when our focus is on the desires of God, rather than on the traditions of higher education, or our job descriptions, or even our own skills.

You know, the state of Montana doesn't have speed limits on many of their roads. And you'd think that people would drive in an uncontrolled way when they are not bound by the limits of a police officer's speed trap.

But when I was in Montana this summer, I drove more carefully than I do anywhere. Because although they don't have a speed limit, what they do have are white crosses about three feet high at every place on the highway where there has been a fatal accident. And it is this reminder of eternal consequences that control driving behavior, rather than an arbitrary speed limit.

And working at a college is somewhat like driving highways with few speed limits, because higher education offers exceptional freedom in how we do our work. So we need to be sure we have an eternal view when we interact with students and work with each other. We need to be sure we see the

cross in everything we do if we are to minister in the name of Jesus, rather than copy the behavior of the world.

Before leaving this point, let me add, if you're at all resisting at all the idea that our purpose is ministry, let me frame one more image.

This summer our students and some of our faculty had a marvelous time teaching and learning in China. And I'm anxious for us all to hear the stories of their ministry.

But I want to ask us, if we picked up Belhaven College and put it down in the middle of China and filled it with 1,800 Chinese students would we teach, coach, administrate, clean, repair, recruit, raise money, or manage files differently?

We shouldn't, for our American students need Christ-centered education just as much as do Chinese students. But most likely each of us would deepen our dependency on God for the outcome of our work if we were serving in remote China – for we would come to campus every day focused on the *ministry* of what we do. And in our weakness to measure up to the challenge of serving in China, we would completely depend on God alone for the outcome.

As we begin this school year, might we each be consecrated anew, for as the scripture says, "When you think of what Christ has done for you, is this too much to ask?"

Second, the scripture calls us to be Contented

When our thinking is transformed through Christ, because we understand our value comes from Him rather than our own strength, it is then, the scripture says, "you will know what God wants you to do, and you will know how good and pleasing and perfect his will really is."

For too many, each day is a continual struggle for who is going to control their life. And when we copy the behavior of the world, we will never be free from that battle.

If we try to teach as the world does, administrate like the world does, coach like the world does, or provide security for the campus like the world does – we will always be frustrated. Because world tells us to point the spotlight inward rather than outward.

But God has a different standard. God wants us to work and live for him, not in the patterns of the world's behavior that are selfish at their core. Instead, you and I will find satisfaction when we work to lift up Christ rather than ourselves, or even Belhaven College.

Of course, personal recognitions will come, for the Lord knows we need to celebrate the successes of one another. And God uses institutional recognitions to share his desires with the broader community. But the heart of the issue is our motivation to honor God, rather than copy the self-focused behavior of the world.

I believe that academic life is especially prone to self-focused temptations. Because the nature of a College is we tend to each do our own individual thing – faculty teach their courses and counsel their advisees, coaches are absorbed in the needs of their team, maintenance people are responsible for their building or specialty, and other functions each can do their own fairly independent thing.

And we each want order, control, and efficiency in our little corner of the college. And pretty much that is how colleges tend to work.

But that is not the nature of ministry in God's name.

If our focus is on controlling our area of responsibility, rather than the ministry, we will become very frustrated. For the real nature of our work runs complete counter to the control wish we could create.

I think there are at least four of these style characteristics that keep us from contentment, if our motivation is control rather than God's ministry.

First, ministry on a campus is accepting God's opportunities
We tend to want to do things when we are good and ready for them. We like term papers turned in at specific times, we like students lined up for registration at a specific hour, we like forms filled out in proper ways. And there are sound and justified reasons for those requirements that we don't need to abandon.

But our most significant ministry will come when we are open to God's opportunities, rather than being so focused on systems. If you haven't been seeing, outside your job description, those ministry opportunities while you clean the building, walk to class, or eat in the dining commons, and then maybe your control priorities are too high and need adjustment?

Second, ministry on a campus is filled with the unique
Education by its nature has become convinced that we are most effective when students are all treated the same. When students complete 128 hours we declare them equally educated; we prefer them to all answer the same questions on a test; we feel pretty good when they all come and sit together in chapel. And again, there are sound and justified reasons for those requirements that we don't need to abandon.

But our most significant ministry will come when we realize there are no two students alike on this campus. They each have special needs, demands, experiences, hopes, hurts, and secrets. If you haven't had ministry opportunities to touch a student at their point of greatest need, then again, maybe your control priorities are too high and need adjustment?

Third, ministry on a campus is often inconvenient.
We do best when students fit into our time schedule. We like them to show up during our well displayed office hours, we like them to have their residence hall crisis during daylight hours, but we like their family's financial challenge to not conflict with our payment plan.

But students live in the world of the immediate, and their needs are nearly always inconvenient for us. If you haven't been inconvenienced and interrupted for ministry, then maybe your control priorities are too high and need adjustment?

Fourth, ministry on a campus is often disappointing.
We want students to "get it" when we first explain it. We want students to "act like adults" because they should be. We want students to have those "ah ha" moments where there lives will be revolutionized because of something we said to them.

But most often, we will not see the direct results of ministry, for we are planting seeds that God will water, warm, and fertilize for weeks, months, or years before the harvest comes. So more often than not, our ministry will include a number of disappointments, sprinkled with a few surprises. If you haven't been having disappointments in your ministry with students, then maybe your control priorities are too high for you're not reaching far enough and trusting God for the outcome?

When we deal with students, and each other, with Godly love, forgiveness, and understanding,
we will have opportunities outside our job descriptions,
we will discover the uniqueness God created in every person,
we will nearly always be inconvenienced and interrupted,
and we will often be disappointed.
But, at those times we will know how good and pleasing and perfect God's will really is" and we will enjoy genuine contentment.

Too often we forget to thank the Lord that we work at a place that not only doesn't stop us from ministering to those around us, but encourages us to go outside our job description to do what God commands.

What a joy to work in a place where we often pray together, a place where we can be corrected in Christian love, and a place where our desire to lift up Christ over-arches all else we do. You know, most Christians in the working world have never dreamed of the type environment that is so common to us.

I pray that you enjoy wonderful contentment in your work at Belhaven, <u>not</u> because your job is easy, your burden is light, or your pace is relaxed, because your contentment comes as you do all God has asked you to do in a way that honors him, rather than copying the behavior of the world.

Contentment begins when we are transformed in how we live, work, and minister together. And contentment grows as we accept being the person that God created us to be, as we rejoice and relax in our uniqueness. I like Neil Warren's definition that say, "contentment lies in discovering who in the world you are, and mobilizing your courage to be that person."

Every other option for finding contentment will be a struggle of pain and frustration.

The scripture says, "God has given each of us the ability to do certain things well. So if God has given you the ability to prophesy, speak out when you have faith that God is speaking through you. If your gift is that of serving others, serve them well. If you are a teacher, do a good job of teaching. If your gift is to encourage others, do it! If you have money, share it generously. If God has given you leadership ability, take the responsibility seriously. And if you have a gift for showing kindness to others, do it gladly."

God has blessed each of us with some amazing gifts that are unique only to us alone:
I wish I could understand intelligent design like Rob Waltzer.
I wish I could fix most anything like Rick Reid.
I wish I could counsel an adult student to push on like Mary Lynn Davis.
I wish I could figure out a computer like Ravi Choppala.
I wish I could coach a team like Judy Chance.
I wish I could teach a student to write like Rose Mary Foncree.

I wish I could manage federal regulations like Linda Phillips.
I wish I could feed hundreds of people like Cynde Houston.
I wish I could guide a freshman like Helen Martin.
I wish I could stretch a dollar like Virginia Henderson.
I wish I had the courage to teach master learner like Pam Jones.
I wish I could run a web page like Doreen Fagerheim.
I wish I could counsel a family on their choice of a college like Steve Scott.

And that list could go on and on for every one of you in this room.

But there is some stuff I can do, that maybe they wish they could do. And our contentment in Christ is enjoying the unique qualities he gave to each one of us, and in utilizing them for his Glory, rather than rejecting his transformation by struggling to be something he didn't make us to be.

Contentment is not found in a career, but in our calling. Which includes understanding and enjoying our Godly gifts; building on the qualities of our temperament; and capturing the focus of our motivations.

This accepting of our unique role in God's plan, leads us to the next stage of God's desires for us.

Because, third, the scripture calls us to be Connected

Verses 4 and 5 of chapter 12 read, "Just as our bodies have many parts and each part has a special function, so it is with Christ's body. We are all parts of his one body, and each of us has different work to do. And since we are all one body in Christ, we belong to each other, and each of us, needs all the others."

I've always been amazed by the disciples. If I'd have been the head-hunter helping Jesus to find those guys, I believe I would have hired more experienced talent. And I think I would have chosen a group better fitted for the job description. But I know I would have found people who at least had the same types of background and strengths so they would be enough alike that they didn't argue over their mission, their purpose and their individual roles.

But Jesus, who knew everything, chose on purpose a diverse support staff – one who was an intellectual, one who was a financier, one who was a leader, one who was an encourager, one who was a counselor, one who helped carry the supplies, one helped serve the meals, and even one who was a skeptic. Some were well educated and some were not educated at all. Some were always up front, and what others did was not very visible.

But Jesus knew that it was their connections together that would make them all more effective than any of them would be on their own. And knowing he would leave them after just three years, they would need the combination of their abilities to begin to reach the entire world with the Gospel. And Jesus knew that each of the twelve of them were necessary if they were to be successful in their overwhelming assignment.

As a College, we too have one rather strange combination of people. Although the academic program is our centerpiece of what we do, because it is the heart of what higher education is all about, God has brought together on our campus a group who, like the disciples, might be difficult to appreciate if we don't remember how much we are connected.

Today, an ideal College can not be what President Garfield said it should be, namely, Mark Hopkins, the renowned president of Williams College on one end of a log and a student on the other end.

Rather, at Belhaven, before a professor and a student ever walk into the classroom:

- Someone has to recruit that student.
- Someone has to raise money to provide scholarship support for that student.
- Someone has to build the buildings to provide the classroom in the first place.
- Someone has to keep those buildings running, painted, and clean.
- Someone has to take care of the grounds around those buildings so that the student will have pride in their home.
- Someone has to figure out how to house and feed that that student.
- Someone has to keep the records of the progress for that student.
- Someone has to write the reports that get that student's academic program accredited and keep that student out of the web of the federal government's regulations.
- Someone has to provide technical support and library resources for that student.
- Someone has to protect that student when the campus is in the city.
- And someone needs to collect money from that student and spend it for the things that student will need.

And those are only the high points, for there are dozens of other steps in between that are critical if that student and professor can forget all the rest and just teach and learn like it is just the two of them sitting on opposite ends of the log.

- But don't forget about the professor who has spent years in preparation, hidden away in some university library becoming an expert in their field.
  And then they teach:
    - spending countless hours mentoring and advising students,
    - preparing top quality class room experiences,
    - grading papers – often writing more detailed comments in response than the student wrote in the first place,
    - studying endlessly to stay current in their field,
    - as well as showing up at chapel, athletic events, and cultural performances to be supportive of students.

And then we can take that same analysis, and apply it to our coaches or our student life people who do all kinds of teaching in a less formal structure, but their influence is not any less vital to a student's success.

<u>We are linked together</u>. So in each of our victories we all can rejoice. And in each of our struggles, we all need to help shoulder the burden. And it is vital that we be able to trust each other.

Without each other, none of us can be effective. And even more frightening, one person has the potential to ruin it for everyone.

As we come to work every day, might we each be consecrated and contented, because we are connected – and that is how Christ wanted it to be.

Finally, the scripture calls us to be Courageous

The scripture demands us to, "Never be lazy in your work, but serve the Lord enthusiastically."

When we are personally consecrated, contended in our work, and connected to one another in Godly trust, it is then we can work courageously.

It is good stewardship to give the College a fair day's work for a day's pay. But working courageously goes far beyond what any ethical person should do.

Working courageously is taking on every challenge with the confidence that God will be responsible for the outcome, and that we can work aggressively and enthusiastically knowing we are doing it in the Lord's name.

Our desire for God to be glorified demands that we work courageously. For if God is going to be glorified,

- He is going to ask us to do things for which no one will give us credit because what we do will be unseen.
- He is going to ask us to respond in love, even though we have every right to get angry and frustrated.
- He is going to ask us to take on much more than our job description demands or the pay check reflects.
- He is going to ask us to turn our back on gossip or criticism when we'll feel left out by not joining in.
- He is going to ask us to carry a heavier burden than we throught we could bear.
- He is going to ask us to help the person we'd rather pass by.
- And he's going to ask us to do what seems impossible.

When we act courageously God will be lifted up, and he will allow us to be part of a life changing education for our students today and a legacy that will last for generations.

Over a decade ago I began a practice of writing down a list of the problems that are consuming me when I am feeling overwhelmed by the challenges. I've been doing this for so long, that I now keep the list on my palm pilot.

While most people only hear me talk about our strengths and successes of Belhaven, I know well, every corner of this institution where we need to make improvements.

Well, in my nearly six years at Belhaven, I've had some frightening lists, and the one I've got going right now that is even more scary than any of the others.

But when I create one of those lists of overwhelming challenges, I put that list away to wait for six months to see what happens. And every time I have done that, when I go back to reexamine the list and enjoy the clearness of hindsight, I always find two things:

- God was in control throughout the entire process so I didn't need to be overwhelmed, and
- after six months have passed I have a new list which seems just even more overwhelming.

We've had some marvelous victories and surprises through these recent years. We'd heard "yes"from God at the right time and "no" when he was protecting us. We've had some mountains that seemed far too high to climb but they are now behind us; we've had some obstacles thrown in our way that we could not move on our own, but we got past them.

But we have been able to be courageous through it all, only because
we have consecrated ourselves to the Lord,
we have been contented in Christ's ministry,
and we have respected our connectedness.
I believe God has honored our willingness to not copy the behavior of the world, but to be transformed and worked courageously.

But we are not the first Belhaven College group of faculty and staff to walk this road and I pray we will not be the last.

I want to close by telling you about the most significant three hours in the history of Belhaven College, for I've never heard of a finer example of God's people
consecrating their work to the Lord,
enjoying contentment despite their circumstances,
capitalizing on their connectedness,
and then acting courageously.

As told to me by President Gillespie's son, and pieced together by our campus historians Evelyn Tackett, Bettye Quinn, and Paul Waibel, what I believe to be greatest three hours in our history happened on August 9, 1927.

In those days, our entire campus was limited to one building, which we now know as Preston and Fitzhugh Halls. These two stately white buildings were all one building, at that time, with the center section being where the lagoon now stands. The porch of that center section had huge Corinthian columns that came down into the courtyard between the buildings and toward what is now our student center.

Well, knowing that the College had to grow, and eventually build more buildings, President Gillespie, who had been president for six years, had left for most of that summer to go to Columbia University in New York City to take a course in college architecture.

At the end of that course, and beginning his trip home, Dr. Gillespie was taking the train a sister Presbyterian College, Princeton University. But while on the train, he received this telegram from his secretary Jennie Armistead, which was sent at 7:35 that summer Saturday morning.
"Belhaven on fire. Absolutely no chance of saving."
Lightening had struck the center part of the building, and that section was going up in flames. But there was nothing to be done to stop the College's only building from burning.

Now, the history is unclear of exactly what happened next. But to get the emotions of that moment, we need to remember that when Belhaven opened in 1884 a fire destroyed the entire home that was our campus, after only seven months of operation.

Our college began in the residence of Colonel Jones Hamilton on Boyd Street, a home which was named "Belhaven" in honor of his family ancestral home in Scotland. But even though the house of our name's origin was destroyed, the College rebuilt and opened on the same location 18 months later.

But the new facility was again destroyed by fire in 1911, at which time the remains were donated to the Presbyterian Church and that is how we became a Presbyterian College. So we reopened for a third time in less than a quarter century, in the suburbs of Jackson, at our current location.

But just sixteen years later, now in 1927, a third consuming fire wiped out the hopes and dreams of Belhaven College, which at the time

was in difficult financial trouble,
fighting to gain its first accreditation,
a physical plant that was already significantly inadequate,
and the faculty had missed pay checks with regularity.

It would have been a very good time to quit.

The heart of the only campus building was totally lost, and the two columns from that front porch that remained standing must have looked barren against the smoldering heap of a building.

But as you might imagine as word spread across Jackson of the fire, board members anxiously came down the dirt road that is now Belhaven Street to be on the campus. Faculty members had all gathered to comfort of one another as their hopes went up in smoke. Students were crying, and staff members were devastated by the loss of everything they had worked so hard to create.

We don't know who led the discussion or maybe it was just a prayer service. It is unclear what turned that crowd from fear to courage. But we do know that just three hours after the first telegram, whatever they talked about, prompted a full board meeting and this second telegram from Dr. Gillespie's secretary.

"Belhaven total loss • Board meeting this morning • formulate plans • rebuild."

God's people who are consecrated, contented, and connected CAN and WILL act courageously.

And in those three hours, what could have been the abandonment of dreams and effort, turned into the most significant moment of courage in the history of Belhaven College.

Besides the raw courage in Christ, there are four things I love about this story:

1. I love it that the president was not even part of the discussion of whether to go on or quit. They were of such one mind that they didn't need any donor feasibility studies, any campus committee meetings, or any planning documents. They were going on with God.

2. I love it that we don't know who led, who resisted, who was afraid, and who got the credit to push ahead. God alone got the glory for the most courageous three hours in our history.

3. I love the "rest of the story," as Paul Harvey says. For while Dr. Gillespie was taking the architectural course at Columbia University, he was required to do a design project. He had never really liked the campus all being one building, and so he developed a plan for taking out the center section, and creating two distinct buildings like we have with Preston and Fitzhugh halls today. So when the President returned to the campus three days after the fire, he came back with fully developed blue prints of how to rebuild. When God asks us to act courageously, he always supplies what we need.

4. And finally, I love it that they put a reflecting pool where the fire had been, just to assure that it never burned again – or maybe, as a close resource of water in case there was a fourth fire to come?

I pray that we don't have a similar three hours this year. But I guarantee, that each of us will have a fire of our own this year – we will each have one or many times when God will call us to act courageously.

- Your moment for courage may come when a student's life will be forever changed because you decided to respond in Godly courage, rather than cast them away.

- Your moment for courage may come when a friend of the College needs you to help them get a fresh vision for what God is doing on the campus.

- Your moment for courage may come when you get frustrated with an employee, and instead of building a wall of separation, you spend the time necessary to work it out.

- Your moment for courage may come when you decide to reach out to students, rather than waiting for them to come to you.

- Your moment for courage may come when you help a student get an insight for how to use the gifts God has given them.

- Your moment for courage may come when you pray instead of criticize.

- Your moment for courage may come in teaching a new course, making a new friend for the college, or helping a student to change their mind about dropping out.

- Your moment for courage may come when you make time for that one extra recruiting college fair, one more fund raising call, one additional student advising meeting, or stopping to fix something not on your work order list.

- Your moment for courage may come by grinding away at the task when it would be much easier to quit or give up.

- Your moment for courage may come when you respond in love, and the other person doesn't even notice.

God is calling you and calling me to act courageously. And as he calls, just like Belhaven College of 1927, God will give us all the resources we need to do what he asks.

This is going to be a great year.

- We have new student center that is going to reshape the character of our campus.
- We have a good budget that even includes some money for raises.
- We have the largest enrollment in history and the most number of faculty ever.
- We a program in Orlando that's ready to pay off significantly in both mission and finances.
- We have more donors giving than ever in our history.
- We have a World View Curriculum that is unique in all of higher education.
- We have an opportunity in the Arts that is unparalleled in the entire Christian world.
- We have an intercollegiate athletic program that genuinely integrates faith into all we do.
- We have earned a firm leadership position in the Jackson Adult education market.
- We have some potential new big stuff in the works that may open even more doors, far beyond what we ever imagined.
- We have momentum.
- We have an agreement of mission unmatched in all of higher education.

Clearly, we have resources and advantages far beyond what anyone could imagine in 1927 as they looked at that smoldering fire. And if they had courage, how much more courage should we have when we see how God has blessed Belhaven College in the year 2001?

This can be the greatest year of your life and mine – and most importantly, the greatest year for our students – if we will refuse to settle for the mediocre results that come when the behavior of the world is copied.

But instead, let God transforms us, so that we can be consecrated, contented, connected, and courageous. Let everything we say and do this year glorify Christ Jesus on the campus of Belhaven College.

I thank the Lord for each of you, and I pray God's best for you this year.