

This is the most important conference I have ever held in my life up to this day. And it is. One day, I saw my dad in a lot of trouble, and I said, "Dad, are you scared?" And he said, "No, I'm nervous," although he put a few other little words in between that. I'm not nervous. I'm scared. I have been ever since I called this, but the last two or three days have really been difficult for me.

We have met today at more than crossroads. We have come to a dividing place. Whatever I ask of you this week will be the most demanding thing as a Christian you've ever had asked of you. And I'm going to ask for a decision. I'm going to ask you to make it clear and clear-cut. And more than that, I'm asking you to make the decision that you will not back out on from now to the day you die. I'm going to read this passage of scripture to you, and I think I can promise you that no conference has ever begun since the day this was written.

One passage of scripture. It's out of Deuteronomy 31:14, and this is what it says. Talk about beginning on a positive note. And the Lord said to Moses, "Behold, the time for you to die. Call Joshua and present yourselves at the tent of meeting that I may charge him." The main point is, and the Lord spoke to Moses and said, "Behold, the time for you to die has come." That's a passage of scripture concerning my life. Now, you have all been so kind...oh, Gene, you'll live and so on, so forth. But the truth of the matter is, if you'll do mathematics, the truth of the matter is, there is no way I'm going to live much longer. People don't live much longer than I have lived. And quite frankly, the way I have been feeling, I don't really want to live much longer.

There's a passage that goes with this in the New Testament because I don't want us to get hung up on Joshua. It's a passage of scripture by Paul when he said goodbye to some men, and when he said goodbye to Timothy. But I'm not going to read those now. I do want to move this to the New Testament and say it was not *one* who was being charged, such as Joshua, but a group of men. And for you, everybody in this room has been called together to receive a charge. I will deliver that charge this weekend. The only people who are exempt from it are unmarried young men because you don't know who you are yet. You really don't. Your wife will explain that to you. Is there anybody married who would like to disagree with this?

Now, Gene, what do you do from this point on? And that's where it gets scary. I don't know how to start talking to you. I really don't. I suppose it's because we exist, we have a hard time identifying who we are. Whereas we can turn around and look at the past, and we can clearly figure out who we are. You're going to get your chance to figure it out now.

Now, I don't think this will be any surprise to Fran, Alicia, Jean, or Paul. Gary, I'm not really sure about. But today, tonight, this week, something ends, something closes, possibly forever, or it goes on. But right here, right now, look at this sign. There's a task that's not finished. I have looked into the face of it, and I am aware that it is not finished. And it is a big task. It's a big, very big task.

Tonight, you will either abandon the unfinished work or carry it on. And when this week is over, I can pretty well guarantee you it will continue...if, or it will die...if. I would like to see it continue, but there are reasons for wanting to see it continue that I'm not sure all of you are really familiar

with, or grasp, or understand. How do I put this in context? How do I reach your heart? How do I demonstrate to you that I'm brewing-well mean business? I pause for the British. They'll be very glad I didn't say what I was about to say. I'm not fully sure I know if I can reach you, but I can tell you what I'm going to do before this weekend is over. I'm going to do something I'm certain of. I'm going to be calling on you, as individuals and as churches, to do what is essentially impossible, because what I'm going to ask you to do is many things. For instance, I'm going to ask some of you who never dreamed of writing a word in your life to become authors because it's "a task unfinished."

I'm going to ask you who have never spoken to speak. Those of you who have never gone to go, those to minister who never ministered, to travel who never traveled, to live who have never really settled whether or not you're part of this humble, pitiful, microscopic, little work. I'm going to ask you to make this the rest of your life and stretch you beyond any stretch you ever thought of in your life. I'm going to call on you to do things that you never could imagine doing.

Sacrifice...I'm not really sure this will be a sacrifice. Sacrifice is when you give your money. The Jacksonville saints laugh at this. And on the other hand, it will be a call to give up, a good part of your life. It's going to take some husbands and wives sitting down and talking to one another really seriously. We'll finish it. Now, what are you? How am I going to do this? How am I going to start? I'm going to start by telling you how you got here - all of us.

Our story actually goes all the way back to the Old Testament. I guess you know that, don't you? And if you ever read it or even parts of it, or you know the story of it, you get some idea that somebody came before Jesus ever got here. And Paul stood in that lineage of prophets and suffering and death. And all those men had at one time or another some reference to their heritage. We have a New Testament heritage. I don't know, sometimes it's more difficult to get a hold of that heritage than it is anything else because it's in a quagmire of verses and teachings. But I'm going to start at what I think is the best place to begin.

We know very little about second- or third-century Christians. We know too much about the fourth century period because of what Constantine did to us, making the Christian faith not only legal but also political, wealthy, and easy. I don't want to dwell on any of that because preachers love to talk about what happened and how everything has been since then. I do want to talk to you about the people who didn't take it easy. Now...you know this story, but we're going to hear it again in context.

I had a thought this week and remembered something I had forgotten. The first term paper I ever wrote in college, and I don't know why I wrote on this. I don't know why I was inclined this way, but as best I can remember, it was a term paper on a fellow named Pope Innocence, and I think it was 13th, but I think I'm wrong, and the persecution of the Waldensians...and I wasn't even saved. Don't ask me why I did that, but it was a harbinger of things to come. By the way, I was 15 years old when I wrote that paper, and my professor was a Catholic. It's hard to explain how corrupt things were. When Constantine left Rome and moved to the city he built, called Constantinople,

the last person he said goodbye to was a bishop of Rome named Sylvester, who was later appointed as the next bishop of Damascus. And after him, shortly thereafter, was an emperor in the west called Maximus. All I can tell you is things got political. They got powerful. The church and the government were not separated. But there was a gentleman.

Folks, it always starts with a man, and whether we like it or not, it's supposed to. We don't always know their names, but *his* name was Priscillian, and he lived in Spain. I don't know what Priscillian did. He's almost a vapor, a ghost. We can see so little of him. All we know is that he drew many people to him who were very dissatisfied with what was happening to the church as it became institutionalized. He was the first to protest, and he was the first to die.

I want you to remember Priscillian, but I want you to remember something else. Somebody explain this to me. They lived for another hundred years. That means that there were very ordinary people who carried on their...use a word, their righteousness, their devotion, 100 years after Priscillian was dead. The group was never large, and their followers died early on. He was beheaded somewhere in Belgium in a city that starts with a T. His strongest followers, there were six of them, were banished from Spain and Belgium and were taken to a strip of islands called the Scilly Isles, which sit at the very bottom of Great Britain. There's a little string of them, most not any bigger than this room, and they were just disembarked there, put off there, and left to die. Still, they lasted a hundred years. I don't know how; all we know is one thing. They were the only thing keeping the faith alive the way it ought to be.

Now, maybe somebody in this room is going to be a doctor. Good. You go be a doctor, and you get a lot of patients. Then you live, and you die. This is what most people in America are going to do. What are you going to do? I don't know those people's names, but I can tell you that they lived on for a long time. They lived on long enough for a man to sneak into a church every night, take blank paper, and copy off an entire Old Testament. He got caught after he finished it, and it went to trial, and the judge's verdict was that the "calf belongs to the cow." He lost his Old and New Testaments, and they had to give them to the church he copied them from. Oh, was he angry...

Now, something that you need to understand, that I don't understand either, is that these kinds come by really rarely. I don't know anything about this man, but already at that time, when he was fairly young, there were at least 12 men whose lives he influenced to the point that they could get in a boat together and paddle, and he said, "We'll stop the first time we can't see Ireland." Because that's where he lost his "calf." And they rode, and they rode, and he kept looking back. They hit the shore of an island that's about a mile square, somewhere around the middle of the 500s. The nice thing about Great Britain is that the Roman Catholics got there last, and they didn't have to fight as the Priscillianists did. They got off that boat, and they built a community, and they referred to themselves as priests, not from the viewpoint of Roman Catholics but from the viewpoint of the priesthood of the believers. These were evangelical Christians.

Columba died, and they buried him there on the island, somewhere around 600. What in God's name kept him alive? It was a little island without any trees, and there were no Roman Catholics

to stop them. They went to Scotland and evangelized those Picts. Who else were those people called at that time? Well, anyway, the Scots, the world's greatest horse thieves. Well, it's true. They brought the gospel to them, and they died; they preached, and they moved on to Great Britain; they built their communities, and they took the gospel... it was what we call an evangelical gospel. They took it to Britain. They took it to Scotland. They took it to Europe. And they built whole towns. They never got near the cities. They went to the cities, but they built their communities outside of them. You can still visit their ruins across Great Britain and in Europe. They even got so far as to build a community in northern Italy. Then the pope sent somebody over there called Augustine, not St. Augustine, but another one, and brought the Catholic Church and brought an army. The Celtic church lasted until about 600. I don't know how they did that. I don't know how they lived that way. They lived and raised sheep and goats. I don't know, but it took some special people.

Then we come to...if we built statues of these people, they would have to be faceless, because we don't know who they are. I will tell you this, nobody paid a greater price than they have. They called them Bogomils, the Paulicians, and the Cathars. He was one of their leaders. There are only two or three people whose names are known to have survived for about 300 years. Does anybody know what their names are? They were in Armenia. They were in the... can you ever figure out the difference between the Baltics and the Balkans? I do not either, but I think he comes from the Balkans. They were all over the Balkans, and they were systematically killed off, and there are others who came after them. Their leaders are forgotten and unknown, but they last for 300 years.

I want us to stop and appreciate those people for just a minute, and then we have to take our hats off. If someone would give me one book that I once held in my hand that I don't have, I can tell you what it was that fast. I was reading it in the library at the Rüsclikon Baptist Seminary in Rüsclikon, Switzerland. I don't know where the book came from. When I went back to get it, I couldn't find it, and I guess it was missing. But it told two or three remarkable stories I've never heard anywhere else. I'm going to tell you that story.

We don't know where the Waldensians began, but I can tell you what I read. There's a Roman Catholic church in the Italian Alps that kept a record... like other churches do... of people, the community, and their baptisms. He wrote a little note, and, as far as I know, that note still exists somewhere in northern Italy. He made this statement in 600 AD. He said there is a group of people living among us here in the hills who claim to have come here during the persecution of Nero. That would have been in 64 AD.

The Waldensians will not make that claim today. They went to seminary, and they learned they're not supposed to make claims like that without proof. All I can tell you is that when Peter Waldo was raised up, out of which came the word the Valdes or Waldensians or valley people, he came along in 1200. When he died, and I say it again, we're going to take our hats off. They never acknowledged the Roman Catholic Church, and they were very biblical. The Catholics hate them because they couldn't put a label on them. And they did something incredible; when the Reformation came along, they joined it. As far as I'm concerned, that's the biggest mistake they

ever made. But they said they were Christians and they would not denominate themselves. That's our word, not theirs, among any people. They sent folks out in twos and sometimes threes. Two older people and a kid, or one older person and a kid, to train the kid to preach the gospel. They were all thinkers...their term...in that day.

They built a room made out of stone slate. It doesn't have any walls. It's just stone. You can see through it. It's there in the Italian Alps, and the men who would go out to preach the gospel referred to themselves as uncles, to separate from fathers, you know, holy father and father this and father that. They said, "Who is your uncle?" They lived in that room until they could quote the entire New Testament in their Waldensian Valley. They were walking bibles.

There's no place they didn't go. I think they never got to England. And there were some places where they were so strong that they actually were in control of some towns. One of those named towns was Alba. And because they were called Waldensians, they were, in this case, called Albigensians. So, it was Albigensian. And the Pope sent an army against that city. And the general cried out, "Kill everybody in it." And someone else called out, "But some of those people inside that town are good Catholics." And the general cried out, "Kill them all. God knows his own." And they slaughtered the Albigensians.

There finally came a day after several hundred years, when they actually took up arms and defended themselves. I'm not sure they should have done that...I don't know...God knows. But they lasted from 1200 to 1500. They actually lasted from 1000 to 1500. How do they do that? How do you do that when they take your leader, and something just keeps on going? I bet you figured out where I'm going by now.

Jesus made a statement. "If we had lived in the days of the prophets, we would not have stoned them." To which Jesus strongly hinted, yes, you would have to stone me. Don't turn that around positively. Yes, I'm a Romanic. Yes, I wish I could have belonged to the Priscillianists, the Celts, but I'd be sitting there taking notes, writing down the history of how they did it. I wish I could have lived among the Bogomils, the Paulicians, and the Cathars. I'd like to know how they did it. I'd like to be here tonight and tell you how they did.

The only thing we know about the Bogomils, the Cathars, and the Paulicians is that they were all Manichaeans, which is absolutely not true because that's what their enemies call them. And it was a good way to kill them. The church didn't like Manichaeans. Every once in a while, they dig up something some of these people wrote, and there's nothing in there to indicate they ever had such beliefs, and that includes Priscillian himself.

Well, there were the United Brethren, who grew out of many of the persecuted groups. Martin Luther said they had greatly influenced him. But there was another group that was just incredible, and they grew up out of nowhere. There's no record of them ever touching anybody else. The only reason they don't have a more glorious history than they did is that I think there were six men who led that group, and all of them, but one, were martyred, and they were all under 30. They began in

Zurich, Switzerland, and their testimony has profoundly influenced me, just as the Waldensians did. They were slaughtered, and they had ironic deaths in that if you believe in baptism, fine. The Catholics drowned them. You want to preach your doctrine as rebaptism, then we'll cut your tongue out for doing so. And they burned them, and they drowned them, and they tortured them to death.

Where are the Dutch? I want to see the Dutch. One, two, three. I read the account of a man, and I can't remember if he walked or rode a horse, and I don't know where he started from. Still, he went to Amsterdam, and he recorded that, of the days he walked, he walked all the way across Holland to some place previous to Holland and all the way to Amsterdam in the middle of one of these bloodlettings. He made the statement, "There was not a tree he passed on his entire journey, but what there was either a Huguenot, a Dutch Protestant, or an Anabaptist nailed to the tree."

I don't think you know that, do you? Okay, CJ, you've never heard that, have you? I'm going to gamble on something here. CJ, would you stand up now? And if I don't miss my bet, either you or you can tell me the name of the man who said it and the place he said it. If you can tell us his name and the place he said it, I'd appreciate it. I'm going to tell the story, and you're going to tell me his name. But as far as I know, this is the most-quoted single story in Dutch history. He stood on the battlements of a city surrounded by the Spanish Catholic army, and he held two arms up, and the Spaniards had just yelled to him, "You should surrender, or you'll starve to death." And he said, "When it becomes necessary, I will eat this arm and fight you with this one." Do you know who he was? You never heard this? Thank you, sister. You don't. You have never heard this story. You haven't either. I never met a Dutchman in my life who didn't know that story.

Well, then, let me tell you a little bit about your history. Do you know this? The Spaniards did everything they could to annihilate Holland. Do you know that? You do know that. That's good. Alright. And you also know why the Flemish hate the French and the northern Belgians hate the Dutch, and they hate the Dutch, and they hate the French, but they hate one another more than they hate the Dutch or the French. You know this? You know this? I think you know that. It's because the Spaniards and the French conquered a little part of Holland, but it was the wrong end of it, the wrong part of it. And then the Huguenots and the Calvinists managed to get in there in this little piece of land called Belgium and turn them into Protestants. But the Protestants were on the Catholic side of Belgium, and the Roman Catholics were on the Protestant side of Holland. And so you got Catholics up against Dutch reform, and they can't get out because the Flemish are in their way to get France. And this all came about from these Spanish and French efforts to annihilate the Dutch.

Well, the next time I see you, you're going to tell me that man's name because I had forgotten it. And you're going to tell me what town he was in, and I've never been a Dutch person who didn't know his story. I tell you, educational systems are coming to pieces. (laughter) I don't think you're aware of how many Dutchmen died in the post-Reformation era. Forgive me. I'll tell you something else: I owe you a debt. Most of you know that when I was very young, I studied abroad. I studied in Switzerland at a Baptist seminary in Zurich. What you don't know is that that was a

liberal school. I never told anybody that. I was getting taught an awful lot of stuff, and I knew what was up, but it was being handed down to me as gospel and law. They weren't going to affect me, but I wanted to know I had an answer to that. And over there in our library, I found the Dutch Reform books on this subject, and they were brilliant. They were incredible and absolutely slaughtered what I was being taught.

I want you guys to know that I owe a great deal to Dutch Reformed theology and to the critical scholars who defended the word of God. I'm sorry for what happened to the Anabaptists. That was probably the purest, cleanest work there was. They got just about decimated. Then a guy named Menno came along, and the Anabaptists got a new name: Mennonites. Are you aware that the Amish are Anabaptist? Didn't you know that? Well, they are the strictest people in this world, and they're very self-righteous because they lead such a clean, pure life. They won't have anything to do with the rest of us. I don't know if most of you know, but it's a religious foundation of theirs.

I will tell you this. I'll tell you what history says. The Anabaptist gospel spread across Europe so quickly because people did not want the state church imposed on them. They didn't want the Catholics, and they didn't want the Lutherans, but there was a blowing of the spirit of God all over. I don't know how many Anabaptists died, but I will tell you how many were estimated to have died in a short period of time. That included those on the road to Amsterdam. If these statistics are true, then this is the largest work of God ever on this earth. That God has ever had on this earth. 5 million.

Then the Moravians. I guess the Moravians shone brighter and shorter than anyone else did. Zinzendorf died; he was the founder of the Moravians. He took the torch from the United Brethren. I believe he died in 1760. But I'll tell you this, they lived long enough that a young man in his 20s who was not saved was going to America from England to preach the gospel, and you can do that if you're an Anglican. And he met...they were having a storm, and everybody thought that the ship was going to sink. Huddled over here in one corner of the ship were a group of Moravians, very calmly, very quietly singing and giving praises to the Lord.

And that young man was absolutely dumbfounded at the peace of those people. Now, somebody tell me what his name was...John Wesley, who got saved later. They held that torch for 100 years, and nobody has done what they've done since then or before. They took the gospel to the Eskimos. Maybe if the brothers and sisters from Johannesburg would do me the favor of telling me, because the names have changed. We read about a group of people who were slaves...no, prisoners who had been turned into slaves...where the gospel of Jesus Christ had never been preached, and they sold themselves into slavery so that they could be put in that country. I believe it was Johann Leonhard Dober, but I'm not sure. I can tell you this: they went there, preached the gospel, and died there. That's what Moravians did, and they did it for over a generation.

I'm not going to tell you how the Moravians have affected my life. I want you to know they have. And before this weekend is over, I'd like to tell you a true story that had to do with the Moravians and us. The Moravians were the last group of people in those dark ages who stood. The story after

the Moravians belongs to us if we want it. It's not the last Christians who stood outside institutional Christianity, but the last decent ones. No one in this room knows the burning drive of my life. Part of it is that we can get back to that kind of testimony. I stand there, and I leap across whatever has happened since then and cry out, let there be a people as decent, as holy, as "un-humanly" driven as were those people, because everything that's happened since then has been a corruption. Every message that you've ever heard me bring, everything that has ever come into my life, every crisis that there's ever been has been for me a call personally to not stoop to the tragedies and dishonesties that have come since the Moravians.

It has been my stand at Santa Barbara. Yes, it was my stand in Portland, Maine, too, when I got up and walked out of the place, that we could have decent workers and that we could have a people who are not God's people because somebody told them they were overcomers or whatever else it was that has perverted and corrupted that stream.