

Why I Am Convinced That the Trustees of Furman University Must Not Alter the Present  
Policy on the Admission of Students  
Francis Bonner

Forward:

On December 8, 1964, the Furman Board of Trustees met in special session in the Board Room of the Administration Building. Shortly before that, the South Carolina Baptist Convention had rejected a resolution which would approve Furman's enrollment of black students. The trustees had previously approved an "open" admission policy. Dr. Blackwell came to attend this special session of the trustees. He had previously been elected but had not yet taken over." He stated his disappointment relative to the Convention's action, but he hoped the Board would not 'give in' to the Convention. But several trustees stated that they should not go counter to the Convention's wishes, and a motion was made to that effect.

Before the vote was taken, I asked the chairman (Wilbert Wood) and Dr. Blackwell if I could speak. They readily agreed, and I went quickly to my office to get the remarks which I had written some days before.

The trustees listened intently as I read, which I did with some fervor.

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I beg your indulgence as I express to you my feelings about the crisis which now confronts Furman University. In the past, I have refrained from voicing my inmost thoughts about the relationship between the South Carolina Baptist Convention and Furman University lest I should be misunderstood. Now, however, if I am honest, if I am to be true to our students, to my faculty, to my colleagues in the administration, if I am to maintain my integrity, I feel compelled to state my views on the issue now at hand. I have not conferred with Dr. Blackwell, Dr. Plyler, or anyone else on what I shall say to you. My friends sometimes are reluctant to have me speak on controversial matters because I am by nature somewhat blunt and outspoken. It is my habit to deal directly with the matter at hand—to cut through extraneous strata and drive straight to the heart of the problem. There is the danger of being misunderstood, of offending. I must take that risk, for Furman now stands at the crossroads. The decisions you will make will determine whether this University will continue to move forward or whether its progress will come to a sudden halt—nay, whether this institution will actually begin to move backward.

I believe I have some claim upon your attention and your consideration at this time. For nearly sixteen years I have given my best efforts to this school. It has become a part of me. Here I have made my home. Here I have reared my family—the only thing on this earth more precious to me than Furman University. I have sunk my roots here, and have hoped to live out my days here in vital service to God and to my fellow man. I doubt that anyone in this room has more to lose than I have in the issue now facing us. But I do not hesitate to undergo the risk of losing, because I am convinced that the cause of *Christian* education stands to lose much more.

Therefore, I hope you will forgive me if I speak directly and to the point. It is certainly not my intention to be officious or insubordinate.

Before I indicate what I consider to be at stake for Furman in this matter, let us analyze what occurred at the recent Convention. To begin with, the approximately 1900 messengers who were in the First Baptist Church of Columbia on Wednesday afternoon, November 11, were not the real Convention. Over 800 of these persons had registered that morning—most of them from the lower part of South Carolina—and were present for the sole purpose of voting on the General Board's recommendation on the admissions policy, and on the new college. By a margin of 28

votes the Board's report was rejected. What did this vote mean? It meant, according to the leaders of the Convention, that the matter of admissions in the Baptist colleges of South Carolina is back where it was before the General Board was directed to undertake its study. In other words, *Furman's policy is back in the hands of the University's trustees*—or, if the trustees choose to go back even further, in the hands of the administration and faculty.

Now, what about Mr. Julian Cave's motion? Everyone, including Mr. Cave, seems to agree that this was merely an expression of opinion. It was not, either in form or intent, a directive or request to Furman's trustees. Even if it had been phrased as a directive, it could not be binding upon the trustees.

One other factor has been pointed out by one of the Convention's leaders, who says he has reliable evidence that the large contingent of Wednesday's messengers from the Charleston area took advantage of the opportunity to vent their feeling of animosity toward Furman. Ostensibly, they had been rallied to ensure acceptance of the new college, but they would not pass up a chance to 'slap Furman down.' I am convinced that this is a true appraisal of the case. It has been apparent that many of the leading founders of the new college have tried in many ways to put Furman in a bad light. There have been frequent inferences that Furman is *not* Christian, that Furman is trying to break away from the Convention, and that Furman's trustees are irresponsible and rebellious. These sponsors of the new college have been operating under the policy that any misfortune of Furman's will, in some unexplained manner, advance their cause. The spirit exhibited by them toward Furman has been one of hostility and animosity. (At some opportune time I would like to explain why I have openly opposed the founding of another Baptist college in South Carolina.)

One final word on the Convention: the leadership of the Convention have expressed themselves clearly in this matter. Almost to a man they say that you should move right ahead with the policy you have already set. Furthermore, most of the ministers of the state are clearly with you and will support you.

Before examining the effects a change in policy would have upon Furman, let us suppose (for the sake of argument) that the Convention *had* issued a 'directive' to the University's trustees.

There is a wide-spread impression that the trustees must abide by the will of the Convention, even if such action would be contrary to the conscience and good judgment of the trustees. Much has been made of the phrase 'subject to the will of the Convention.' This simply is not a correct impression.

The charter of Furman clearly places the governance of the University in the hands of the trustees. *Legally*, the Convention cannot force the trustees to do *anything*. This principle has been enunciated by one of the leading legal authorities in the nation. One corporation cannot take any action which is binding upon another except by the consent of that second corporation. For example, Furman's charter cannot be changed by the Convention; it can be changed only by Furman. The trustees consented to the change involving fraternities not because they felt obliged to do so, but simply because they thought fraternities were not worth the risk of a break between Furman and the Convention. The issue now at hand is of a completely different nature. Let us look at it a moment.

In the case of fraternities, the *trustees had made no policy*. There was no decision to reverse. In the case of the admissions policy, a decision was made, was announced, and became public knowledge. That decision was greeted far and wide with approval and acclaim. It received the enthusiastic endorsement of students, faculty, administration, many of the alumni, and much

of the general public. If that decision should now be reversed there would be far more damage than had the decision never been made. A reversal would be a demonstration that the trustees of Furman are not (in the final analysis) the policy-making agency of the University—are *not, in truth, trustees*.

This is one of the two matters which are of such great concern to students, faculty, and the administration—especially the administration.

You have recently elected a new president for Furman, a man of dedication, ability, and great stature. One of the reasons he accepted this appointment was the prospect of having an active board of responsible and reliable trustees. Surely he will not be asked to begin his tenure in office under the shadow of doubts cast by vacillation upon the issue now facing us.

There will never be a more important issue to face this board than this one on the admissions policy. There will never be a better opportunity to verify the fact that the Board of Trustees of this University are in charge and will follow the dictates of conscience and good judgment.

Now, what is at stake for Furman in this issue? The answer is appallingly simple: *the University's academic program and its chance for further progress*.

First, let me mention two matters which we have hitherto been reluctant to discuss—reluctant because these two matters—accreditation and finances—have been described as red flags to those who have been critical of Furman. But these matters *should* be discussed for simple and obvious reasons: without accreditation a college has no standing or respect in the educational world, and without money it cannot operate or build.

How about accreditation? The Standards of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools clearly prescribe that the governing board of each accredited institution must establish the policies under which that institution will operate. Furthermore, the governing board is to protect the administration and faculty from undue pressures from political or religious groups. Furman's accreditation would be in danger if the trustees should surrender to the Convention the constitutional right to set the University's basic policies. And what if Furman should lose its accreditation? The answer again is appallingly simple. The faculty would disintegrate, good faculty replacements could not be secured, good students would not come, Furman's degrees would be almost worthless, and many of our sources of financial support would be cut off.

How about money? First, few—if any—donors will support an institution which does not have firm and responsible management. Second, few—if any—donors today will support a college or university which operates under a policy of exclusion and denial. And I am not talking just about the government. This is generally true of foundations, industry and business, and many individuals. There is abroad today a conviction that no self-respecting educational institution has the moral right (to say nothing of the legal implications) to shut its doors to any prospective student merely upon the grounds of race or color. Any college which operates today upon a policy of 'white only' will have a difficult if not impossible job of securing the funds necessary to carry on this very expensive business. (Refer to Wofford's experience. Refer to Weaver & HHFA.)

If Furman should now revoke its policy of considering for admission all qualified applicants we would have to forget about the three dormitories we hope to start this spring and our entire building program would come to a virtual standstill. We would have to forget about the 1965 summer institutes for high school teachers of foreign languages, English, and history—and all future institutes. We would have to discontinue our training program for the ninety student nurses now attending Furman. We would have to forget about the numerous research

projects which our science teachers conduct each year with the aid of grants. We would have to forget about any further special grants for the library.

Of the four educational institutions benefitting from The Duke Endowment, Furman would be the only one unable to consider Negroes for admission. While this would not mean our being dropped from the program, it could well mean that we could not expect any more of the bonuses which have frequently come our way in the past. The trustees of The Duke Endowment feel strongly about this matter.

Let me mention now a matter which has been dear to our hearts for many years and which has been a dream of Dr. Plyler's. I refer to the efforts to secure for Furman a chapter of Phi Beta Kappa."

It would be difficult to describe for you the benefits Furman could derive from having this chapter. In South Carolina only the University of South Carolina and Wofford have chapters. And Wofford has made great capital of having the only chapter in a private college in the state. The chief benefit comes to the students. I wish I could tell you how much it would mean to our best graduates to be members of this scholastic fraternity. I wish I could tell you how much it would mean to the University—in attracting bright students, in obtaining highly qualified teachers, in prestige in the academic world, and even in bringing more financial support.

We have applied for a chapter of Phi Beta Kappa each triennium since 1949. During the early years we were not successful because Furman had too many purely vocational courses such as home economics. Our applications in 1958 and 1961 were rejected because of the disproportionate amount of financial aid which was given to athletics. We have good reason to believe that the application submitted last month will receive favorable consideration—provided no other obstacle rears its head. My conversation with officials of Phi Beta Kappa indicate that no college which has a segregated policy of admissions has any chance of being granted a chapter.

Let us now consider our students—who are as fine in character and behavior as may be found anywhere. You will recall that they have expressed themselves as favoring our present admissions policy. They are very sensitive to issues involving social, religious, and political justice and injustice. When they observe inconsistencies and contradictions in the governance of Furman they become confused, bewildered, and frustrated. They have found it difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile some of the actions of the Convention with the Convention's expressed concern with Christian education. They readily employ such terms as 'prejudice,' 'bigotry,' 'narrowness,' 'hatred,' and 'hypocrisy' to the Baptists in general. They have openly questioned the integrity of Baptists, and the Baptist ministry has reached a low level in their esteem."

These students have expressed their confidence in the Furman trustees. They look to you for positive action. You can do much to improve the image of Baptists in their eyes.

You doubtless have observed the contrast in the behavior of the students of Wake Forest and Furman. Our students have a tradition of order and calmness. They are much more mature than many of their elders. These young people are our leaders and responsible citizens of tomorrow—our ministers, our teachers, our missionaries, our deacons, our business men, our doctors, our lawyers and statesmen, and our trustees. You are in an excellent position to help them become the best kind of leaders. We are doing the best we can for them. We need your support.

Now let us look at the group I consider to be of primary importance to the well-being of Furman University—the group nearest and dearest to my heart. I refer to the faculty. The burden of our entire educational operations rests squarely upon the shoulders of these men and women.

I challenge anyone to find at any college or university a finer faculty than we have at Furman. Some other institutions may have more PhD's, but we have more than adequate in this regard. Some other university may have a faculty more productive in research and publishing, but we are well above average in this respect also. *No* other college has a faculty more dedicated and more thoroughly Christian than is ours. These are teachers I shall be proud to have instruct my children. And the fact that our faculty are profoundly *Christian* poses the problem which now gives me such great concern. They *insist* on Furman's being Christian in action as well as in name. Most of them elected to teach at Furman because they considered it to be Christian as well as academically sound.

During the past two or three years, as I have searched far and wide for the kind of teachers we want—you want—at Furman, as I have sought those who are professionally qualified, expert in pedagogy, dedicated, and imbued with a sense of Christian mission, I consistently have encountered this question. 'What,' asks the prospect I am seeking to sell Furman to, 'what is Furman's position on the admission of non-white students?' When I have told them that we had solved this problem the response has always been, 'That's good.' To be more specific, let me name some of the teachers we have engaged in the last few years who expressed concern about this matter: Mr. Brian Gillespie (English), Dr. William Leverette (history), Dr. Donald Clanton (mathematics), Dr. Carey Crantford (Spanish), Dr. Carl Cobb (Spanish), Dr. William Reagan (French), Mr. Norman Whisnant (German), Dr. Edgar McKnight (religion), Dr. Philip Hill (speech), Mr. Jay Walters (political science), Mr. Eugene Miller (political science), Dr. Virgil Williams (sociology), Dr. William Pielou (biology), Dr. Robert Kelly (biology), Dr. Donald Kubler (chemistry), Dr. Ernest Lumsden (psychology), and Dr. Gilbert Fairbanks (biology).

But these new teachers—the young and enthusiastic professors upon whom we have planned to build our faculty of tomorrow—are not the only ones who are disturbed about our present predicament. The old ones are just as deeply disturbed—R.C. Blackwell, J.A. Southern, DuPre Rhame, Charles Burts, Carlyle Ellett, Ernest Harrill, John Patty, Albert Sanders, Winston Babb, A.E. Tibbs, Delbert Gilpatrick. And this concern is shared by the middle group, who are already among our leading teachers: David Pulley, John Crabtree, Joe King, Robert Craps, Benny Reece, and others. In fact, every single one of our teachers and staff members is profoundly concerned.

I do not know how many of our faculty we shall lose if our present admissions policy should be changed or delayed. I doubt that many, if any, of the old group would leave. Like me, they have deep roots here. They have developed an intense loyalty to Furman. Some of the middle group will leave—perhaps two or three. Of the new group, my most careful estimate is that ten would not be here next semester, and perhaps four or five others would not return for the fall of 1966. (Let me read some of their letters.)

Losing so many able teachers would be a tragic and almost mortal blow to our academic program. Our accreditation would be in immediate jeopardy. This would be a more severe blow than the Southern Seminary suffered when the famous twelve were 'fixed' several years ago. And finding suitable replacements would be almost impossible. Furman could not recover from this calamity within two decades.

But one may say, "If these teachers are motivated by such a commendable sense of Christian mission, why would they be so ready to leave Furman?" We must remember that there are other Christian colleges and universities, many of which have solved the problem we now face. These teachers would be welcomed at Davidson, Wake Forest, Stetson, Wofford, Mercer, and dozens of others. The supreme irony of the whole matter would be that their departure from Furman would be prompted by the precise Christian concern to which our Convention has paid so much lip service.

As I have said before, our faculty are concerned about this problem on two accounts: first, will Furman University be thoroughly Christian; and, second, will the trustees of Furman *prove* themselves to be the policy-making agency of the institution?

I do not intend to sound like an alarmist in regard to our faculty. But this matter is of the gravest importance. You will recall that the faculty are unanimous in their position on this matter. And, like the students, they have expressed their confidence in the trustees. They are relying on you to do the right thing.

Now I would like to reiterate what I believe all of us recognize as the real issue before us. The real issue is whether Furman University will be in the main stream of the great missionary program of the Southern Baptist denomination or whether this great institution will be turned into the shallows by the forces of prejudice, ignorance, and narrowness. The issue is whether we shall employ basic Christian principles in operating this school, whether we shall be Christian in deed as well as in name, whether we shall demonstrate genuine concern for our fellow men, whether we shall participate in the task of training able and responsible leadership for Southern Negroes, whether we shall recognize the service we can render in training Negro ministers, teachers, nurses, and missionaries. Mr. Wood's statement of the Board's motives for taking action on Furman's admissions policy is a thorough treatment of these matters and perhaps should be read again by all of us.

I deeply and sincerely appreciate your forbearance and patience in hearing what I have said. Let me conclude with one thought.

Someone may say that the time is not propitious, that we should wait, that we should delay. I would repeat what I heard someone say recently at the Convention: "There may be many wrong ways to do a right thing; there is no right way to do a wrong thing."

Please believe me. The welfare of the University depends upon your doing the right thing—now.

We have confidence in you—that you will do the right thing.

Don't let us down.

P.S. I added: "you should do this not because the students and faculty urge it—which they do—not because it will be of financial benefit to Furman—which it will—and not because it is the Christian thing to do—which it definitely is. You should do this simply because it is the *right* thing to do!"

(They did it!)

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#### Postscript

When I finished speaking, there was complete silence for what seemed to be a long time. Then one of the trustees rose—ironically, it was Dr. Orr, the one who had made the motion to comply with the action of the Convention—and quietly stated that he had not clearly understood the nature of the situation. But now he understood. He then moved that Furman's admissions policy should not have any restrictions as to race. His motion passed without dissent.

The trustees did not know that I had already approved the admission of four black students for the semester beginning in February—soon after that Board meeting. Three were graduate students, and one would be a freshman. The latter was Joe Vaughn, whom I had selected in the summer of 1964.

I had asked Mr. Sapp Funderburk to go to Sterling High School—the only black high school in Greenville—and find the best male student there. I also asked Sapp to provide a full scholarship for Joe’s first year. I then had a conference with Joe and found him to be an ideal choice. I approved his admission for the following February, but arranged for him to spend his first college semester at Johnson C. Smith University, a black school in Charlotte.”

So, within a few weeks after the trustees reaffirmed the open-admission policy, Furman enrolled its first black freshman. Joe proved to be an ideal student. (He made a solid ‘A’ in my Chaucer course, a difficult thing for *anyone* to do.)

Signed Francis W. Bonner.