

Convictional Commitment in Challenging Times
Isaiah 6:1-13

Story: COVID and tumultuous times

It's hard to believe that about this time, six years ago we were entering into a pandemic situation which would rock our world. Even our vocabulary changed, at least in the frequency of certain words or phrases such as: social distancing, virtual, pivot, curbside, new normal and tumultuous times.

We are glad that all of that is behind us. Yet, some things have remained. For example, people still say we are living in tumultuous times.

In my daily Bible reading, I recently came across a very well-known passage in the book of Isaiah. This passage speaks about worship, about calling and about mission.

I believe it speaks to us today. We need a **convictional commitment in challenging times**. That is what I have entitled my address to you tonight,

Isaiah 6:1-8 (NIV)

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. 2 Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. 3 And they were calling to one another:

"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory."

4 At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. 5 "Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord

Almighty.” 6 Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. 7 With it he touched my mouth and said, “See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.” 8 Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?”

And I said, “Here am I. Send me!”

This powerful vision describes Isaiah’s calling experience. He could never forget this vision. It marked him. It set him on course. At any given time during his ministry he could think back to this moment and get his bearings.

Texas Baptists are grounded in that kind of vision. We celebrate 140 years of ministry this year. We must continue to celebrate and remember this legacy of cooperation. Our heritage helps us keep our bearings in challenging times.

We are preparing for our annual meeting in Waco around the “Loving God” aspect of the Great Commandment and we are highlighting BGCT’s Legacy of Cooperation. It’s going to be a great meeting!

This passage from Isaiah speaks to God’s call on His people called Texas Baptists. It was true in 1886 and it is true in 2026.

1. A Conviction Call (1)

Isaiah begins his testimony with the phrase, *“In the year that King Uzziah died.”* This was the usual way to communicate a calendar date. The way the Bible writers kept track of years had to do with when a king occupied a throne and when he died. Isaiah is giving us the specific time in history when God called him.

But beyond the specific calendar date, *"The year that King Uzziah died"* is also a statement about the quality of time. King Uzziah had been a good king most of his reign. He reigned for 52 years. Under his leadership there was prosperity, military strength and spiritual vitality.

Regrettably Uzziah's success went to his head. He became overconfident and proud. Proving that pride comes before the fall, Uzziah took it upon himself to burn incense in the temple, a role prescribed exclusively for priests. Because of it God struck him with leprosy.

What was the significance of his death? Some people mourned it. Others perhaps were glad about it. It is perhaps not very different from any modern-day ruler or elected leader.

Regardless of how good or bad Uzziah was as a king, his death brought about uncertainty. Who would succeed him? What kind of king would he be? Would he fear God or do evil? Would he serve the people or oppress them? How many people had to die to secure the throne?

If you read the books of Kings and Chronicles in the Bible, you'll notice how often a new king would kill all his brothers. Sometimes they would kill anyone who might be a potential contender to the throne. Hundreds of people were often killed when a new king came to power.

In other words, these were uncertain and challenging times. That's when Isaiah's call takes place. But notice the contrast of what could be perceived as bad news, *"In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple."*

When the eyes of many were placed on the king, when the eyes of the people might have been placed on an empty throne, when hope seemed to be scarce, God showed Isaiah a throne that is above all earthly thrones!

"I saw the Lord seated on the throne" is the conviction that regardless of how troubled our times are, regardless of how uncertain things are in a country or in a denomination, God is the eternal King, high and exalted.

The train of his robe filled the temple! There is room for no one else in the heavenly temple where God reigns. Earthly governors come and go. Spiritual leaders come and go. Our call is not dependent on a human leader but the one who is Holy, Holy, Holy and the whole earth is filled with his glory.

What we need most as Texas Baptists in challenging times is a vision of God on his throne, in all of his majesty and holiness. When we see God above it all, we can live out our call with conviction and confidence.

We have launched two prayer efforts this year. The first one is the BLESS app which allows Texas Baptists to pray every day for their neighbors by name. The other has been a 50 day prayer emphasis from Easter Sunday to Pentecost Sunday, which is this next Sunday.

We are praying for the lost. We are praying for the troubled times in which we live. Prayer is about bringing needs before God. But it is also about getting a glimpse of God. It is about remembering that He is able. He can speak peace into the storm. He can bring beauty from ashes. He can bring life from the grave. I pray that we would have a fresh vision of who God is!

2. **A Confession Call (5-7)**

A true encounter with the Lord who is on the throne in heaven leads naturally to confession. The evidence of our being in the presence of a Holy God is brokenness, confession and humility.

Isaiah, as righteous as a prophet as he might have been considered, recognized that he was a man of unclean lips and that he lived among a people of unclean lips.

The vision of the God who called us leads us to be in awe of Him. When we get overwhelmed by how holy he really is, we cannot help but be aware of our sinfulness and our inadequacy.

When Isaiah confessed his sinfulness, the seraph took a coal from the altar, touched his lips, and declared, *“your guilt is taken away and your sin is atoned for.”*

For us who live on this side of Easter, we know there is no better altar than Calvary. It is in Christ that we have forgiveness and cleansing. It is in the sinless Son of God that our guilt is removed and we receive atonement. In Christ, and Christ alone.

One of the most common sins among God's people is the sin of spiritual pride. Sometimes we think that because we have been around a long time we can take on God's mission. Perhaps we rely on our resources, our size or our knowledge.

When we think we have it all figured out. When we act with arrogance and self-confidence, when we try to occupy the throne that belongs to Christ and Christ alone, we are in danger. The end of King Uzziah stands as our warning.

Spiritual awakening begins with the confession of sinfulness. Thank God that we receive forgiveness the moment we confess. Beyond confessing our sins we must also confess our weakness and inadequacy. We must come to terms with the truth that we cannot do this alone.

As we look at the fields which are ready for harvest, as we see the turmoil and tension in our culture, as we grieve with churches who split, who close their doors or who are on life-support, as we deal with all of the controversies of the day, we must confess, "this is too big for us!"

We must pray, "God, if you don't go with us, we won't go. Lord of heaven and earth, if you won't fight our battles, we will lose. The Battle belongs to you! Without you, we can do nothing!"

If we are to plant churches, revitalize churches, live out the Great Commandment and the Great Commission so Texas can be won for Christ, we need the Lord of Calvary and of the empty tomb. If our cooperative efforts will mobilize people in Texas to the nations, we need God to do it through us. That's part of our confession!

3. A Commission Call (8)

The wonderful thing about being forgiven is that it frees you up to serve God. The beautiful thing about grace is that when you receive it, you can let it flow through you.

God's grace in Christ equips us to be sent by him. Yet God does not push us into his mission by force. He invites us. He calls us. He asks Isaiah, "*Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?*" It is an invitation, to which Isaiah responds decisively, "*Here am I. Send me!*"

The expected outcome of an experience in God's presence is to be sent out. Worship should give us a vision of the Lord, high and exalted. Worship should lead us to acknowledge and confess our sin. Worship includes the experience of forgiveness and grace in Christ.

Yet worship is incomplete without our response to God's call that says, "*Here am I. Send me!*"

Texas Baptists gather in local congregations every week. Texas Baptists preach, teach, serve and equip on church campuses, on college campuses, in agencies of human care. Texas Baptists do many good things every day.

Yet we must always live out as a sent people. Our emphasis on the Great Commandment and the Great Commission is not just a cute logo for the next season of Texas Baptists life. It is a reminder that God expects us to live as a sent people.

The Lord who sits on the throne of heaven, high and exalted, sends us! That is no small thing. Loving God and loving people as we make disciples of all nations is not the idea of a convention or a program designed by a church. It is God's commission to us!

The very reason the Baptist General Convention of Texas was formed 140 years ago was to be on mission with God. The very nature of who we are as an organization is God's call to be a sent people.

The GC2 Strong strategy is being implemented this year. Our team has designed a process, has developed an instrument, has inventoried the ministries of our Texas Baptists staff, has enlisted coaches and navigators and is ready to launch the pilot project followed by broader implementation.

The GC2 Strong strategy aims to both serve and collaborate with churches by helping them to consider and strengthen their Great Commandment and Great Commission practice. In other words, GC2 Strong seeks to walk with all Texas Baptists as a sent people.

We will launch a pilot project this September. You will hear more about this and about plans for 2027 tomorrow from Sergio Ramos. We want you to be informed about the strategy and the practical steps that we are taking to implement it.

One of the most encouraging aspects of the GC2 Strong Process is that it is being built on a tried and true existing ministry. GC2 Strong is not the same thing as PAVE. Yet GC2 Strong is built on the conceptual network of PAVE.

Both processes are built on biblical principles. They offered customized assessment and resourcing to local churches rather than canned programming. And they utilize practitioner coaches to come alongside church leaders. With minimal staff they can serve the churches across our states by developing a large network of pastor/coaches.

PAVE has seen hundreds of churches experience renewal, increase baptisms exponentially and rediscover the joy of being on mission with God. GC2 Strong is built on the same principles and paradigm.

To use Henry Blackaby's language, "we have seen where God is at work and we are joining him there." The GC2 Strong process intends to join God where he is currently working.

I also want to make clear that GC2 Strong is not just a program or a department of the Texas Baptists organization. GC2 Strong is the core culture of who we are and what we are doing. We are aligning our entire organization around this focus.

In other words every aspect of what we do as your executive board staff should be directed to strengthen churches, strengthen ministers, and strengthen missions engagement for the sake of the Great Commandment and the Great Commission. It will be weaved through every area of TXB.

We are already doing this. We are just sharpening the organization for greater effectiveness. We believe the problem of lostness in our state will be addressed most appropriately when churches are maximizing their Great Commandment and Great Commission practice.

There are many good things we can spend our time and money on. There are many interesting conversations we can have about all kinds of topics and issues. But we must never neglect the primary reason we exist.

We exist because the Lord on the heavenly throne, high and exalted, has called us to go and Texas Baptists have said, *"Here we are. Send us!"*

4. A Commitment Call

Most often when we consider this passage in Isaiah we stop at verse 8. The rest of the chapter is not as popular as the first eight verses.

Isaiah 6:9-13 (NIV)

He said, "Go and tell this people:

"Be ever hearing, but never understanding;

be ever seeing, but never perceiving.'

*Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull
and close their eyes.*

*Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears,
understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.”
Then I said, “For how long, Lord?” And he answered:
“Until the cities lie ruined and without inhabitant,
until the houses are left deserted and the fields ruined and ravaged,
until the Lord has sent everyone far away and the land is utterly forsaken.
And though a tenth remains in the land, it will again be laid waste.
But as the terebinth and oak leave stumps when they are cut down,
so the holy seed will be the stump in the land.”*

Do you find it interesting that once Isaiah answers God's call to be sent in the affirmative, God tells him that it won't go well for him. He will proclaim God's Word but people will not receive it. There will be no immediate success for Isaiah's ministry!

In other words, God's call is not a call to popularity. God does not promise that everyone will accept our message. Saying *“here am I. Send me”* to the Lord does not mean everyone is going to like us or support us.

Isaiah had to be committed to the call regardless of the initial rejection. Isaiah had to be committed to the mission regardless of the lack of immediate results.

We must be committed to God's call on us to be on mission with Him regardless of the cost, regardless of the pressure, and regardless of the opposition. We must remember our call. We must stay stubbornly focused on God's mission.

These are challenging times indeed.

Staff Reorganization

We have been working on realigning our staff to serve the mission. We will implement a staff reorganization this summer that helps us be more effective in our GC2 Strong Strategy.

This process has been bathed in prayer, has involved multiple leaders, and has been refined over multiple meetings. It has not been easy but we believe it is necessary in order to accomplish our purpose.

This reorganization will keep GC2 Strong as the core of the organization, permeating every aspect. We will do away with the “centers” terminology. Instead we will have three primary teams: the Church Strong Team, the Minister Strong Team, and the Missions Strong Team.

The Christian Life Commissions and the Collegiate Ministry Team will continue to exist but they will be focused on serving the three primary areas of emphasis. We will also build-in collaboration across teams so that we can be most effective in evangelism, discipleship, leadership development and missions.

Although there are budget considerations, which I will address momentarily, I want to be clear that the reorganization was initiated for effectiveness in our mission, and it is not a reaction to the financial challenges.

Budget Right-Sizing

In addition to the reorganization we are also right-sizing the organization. You are aware of our Cooperative Program decline. Though this trend of church giving decline has

lasted for some 20 years, its cumulative effect on our ability to do ministry requires urgent attention today.

BGCT is not in financial trouble today. Good stewardship has been exercised to date. However, if we do not take necessary measures we could potentially be in financial trouble in the future.

Cooperative Program Trends and Tasks

As you know, I have appointed a Cooperative Program task force, which you approved in our February meeting. Under the leadership of chairman Keith Warren, this group is reviewing a series of reports and is preparing to host its first in-person meeting to process what they have learned and plan next steps.

We look forward to learning more about the ways churches value the Cooperative Program, why trends are the way they are, and what actions we might take so that we can forge a path forward. Additionally, we have hired a new CP Director. Jeff Donnell. You will hear from him tomorrow.

We pray and hope that based on the information we discover and on the strategy that is developed, we can see a positive turn in CP giving over the next couple of years. But we are realistic that we cannot turn around a decades-long trend overnight.

Thus, as we plan for the 2027 budget, we are looking at a sizable potential reduction in the CP budget that is in keeping with current and projected giving trends. This is not a small amount and the adjustment will touch every part of the organization. This is neither easy nor pleasant nor popular. Yet it is the necessary responsible stewardship measure that must be taken. You'll hear more about this tomorrow.

Constitution and Bylaws Task Force

The Constitution and Bylaws Task Force, under the leadership of madam chair Suzie Liner, has also met and is working to bring our governing documents up to date. This is not an easy task and it is not always a popular one but it is one that needs to get done if we are going to continue to be effective in our mission.

We hope to receive recommendations from the task force to the executive board in September of this year.

Relationship with Baylor

Speaking of challenging times, there has been much written and said about BGCT's relationship with Baylor University recently. Two student-led events on Baylor's campus April 22 have caused much controversy and have brought to the surface the topic of the relationship between the two organizations.

I made brief statements about this that were carried on our Texas Baptists social media accounts and in our Texas Baptists Life Advisory email on two recent and subsequent Fridays. I am asking that this executive board through the IRC have a conversation about this relationship.

The IRC heard from me and from Dr. Linda Livingstone this afternoon. The committee reviewed a list of items that are being considered in regard to a potential change in the relationship between BGCT and Baylor.

This begins a conversation which I hope will result in a report and some recommendations for change to this executive board in September. It is too early now to share details but we will keep you informed as the conversations advance.

For now, I want to communicate some items of importance in this regard. There are many valid questions about the two events that took place on the Baylor campus last month. Although there have been a few who expressed concern about the TPUSA rally, most of the concern has come from the "All are Neighbors" event which featured two LGBTQ advocacy speakers, among others.

Baylor leadership has stated that neither of these two groups or events represent Baylor's official values or views. It goes without saying that the same is true for Texas Baptists.

While there has been much discussion about the nature and significance of these events, it is important to note that the conversations we are having are broader than either of these two events.

In fact, the topic about Baylor came up at the IRC level in February. The broader question raised in that meeting was about how the IRC could best have conversations with all of our universities to ensure there was like-mindedness in regard to ethical matters, and specifically in regard to matters of gender and human sexuality. The IRC wants to make sure it is doing its job so that messengers can be informed and feel more confident.

Additionally, I have had conversations with Baylor leadership since our annual meeting last November. We are aware of concerns that have been voiced and we have discussed how we might best address those.

While a narrow majority of messengers voted down a motion that would mandate a review of the relationship by the IRC, the BGCT executive board and Baylor leadership have the freedom to have voluntary conversations that may result in future changes and recommendations to the respective governing bodies.

We recognize that the historical relationship that BGCT and Baylor University have shared for 140 years has borne much fruit over the years. Spiritual life on campus, including BSM and FM72, has often brought renewal to the university and to churches, including in countless students coming to Christ.

Recently Baylor University donated a plot of land on campus to Texas Baptists where we are currently building a new BSM facility that is the property of the BGCT but will be a blessing to students on the Baylor campus and beyond.

Churches have invested much in the university and its students. Texas Baptists individuals have served on the board of regents, have taught in the classrooms, and many of them have been donors to the university.

Baylor has prepared leaders in various vocations who serve in our churches, institutions and communities. Truett Seminary has equipped many of the pastors and ministers who serve in Texas Baptists churches.

It is not an overstatement to say that Baylor has greatly benefited from the relationship with Texas Baptists. The same is true of Texas Baptists. BGCT has greatly benefited from Baylor University.

While both Baylor and BGCT share a Baptist heritage, a commitment to the church, and many values, there is a significant distinction between the two. Baylor is an R1 university that strives to be a distinctively Christian university. As such it remains a very unique university not just in the Texas landscape but in the nation.

Texas Baptists is a convention of churches that cooperate together for the sake of God's mission, or to quote our governing documents, "all the interests of our Redeemer's kingdom." Although we are not a creedal convention, we do share a Baptist confession. While we strive to be a big tent convention, there are stakes in the ground that define our fellowship.

One of those matters is our stance on human sexuality. We hold to a traditional Christian view of human sexuality, which we believe to be biblical. While Baylor's statement on human sexuality does not differ from BGCT's, their view on how to apply it in a context of academic freedom, separates the two.

It is at this juncture that these conversations of the relationship between the two institutions become necessary.

It is true that Baylor University and Texas Baptists share a 140-year old relationship. It is also true that that relationship has changed over the years.

One of the most significant changes in the relationship took place in 1991 when Herb Reynolds was president. This unilateral decision is the biggest change in governance that has taken place in the history of the relationship.

This change led to the adoption of a special agreement that has been revised or renewed in 2001, 2011 and 2023. Currently no CP dollars are given to Baylor's budget.

Texas Baptists contribute in a strictly designated way to scholarships, BSM, and ministerial financial aid for Baylor and Truett Seminary students of BGCT churches. BGCT elects four of the Baylor board of regents, which represents approximately 25% of the total.

It may very well be time for another change in regard to financial support and regent election. BGCT and Baylor are two mature organizations which have grown significantly and have the freedom to change the way in which they relate to each other.

I want you to know that I am willing to work with the IRC, with you and with Baylor leadership to do what is best for Texas Baptists. I believe this can be accomplished in a civil and respectful manner that honors God.

I often refer to Texas Baptists as a family. I believe in many ways we are family. As you know families change over time.

My wife and I are parents of adult children. We also have one living parent, Monica's mom. Both Monica and I have siblings. We do not financially support any of these adults. Neither do they support us. We do not make decisions in their households. Neither do they make decisions in ours.

Yet, we still pray for each other, share meals and special occasions together, and often ask each other for advice. We are still family!

Not only that, but we are a family on mission. That means we need to partner together as Texas Baptists churches with universities, human welfare agencies and other like-minded organizations to address the lostness in our state and world.

We need to collaborate to call out the called, equip ministers, mobilize missionaries, educate the next generation of Baptist leaders in all vocations, etc. We cannot do this alone.

At the same time we partner and collaborate with others in a way that is true to our Baptist confession and our ethical convictions. We are committed to do this in a Christ-like manner.

BGCT needs to remain a centrist convention

Over the last two weeks the BGCT and I have been called fundamentalists and liberals, often on the same day. That is very interesting and evidence of the challenging times in which we are serving.

I believe labels are relative. People often use labels to dismiss those who do not agree with them. What's a fundamentalist? What's a conservative? What's a moderate? What's a centrist? What's a progressive? What's a liberal? Well, it depends, doesn't it?

Illustration: Plane departure from DFW and arrival in McAllen

When I was a pastor in McAllen and I served on this board, I often flew from the McAllen airport to DFW and back.

As you know the DFW airport is huge! It is a bit bigger than the McAllen airport. Sitting in the airplane when it took off from the DFW airport, it seemed like it taxied on the runway for miles. Yet as it finally took off, I looked out the window and the airport seemed to be getting smaller and smaller.

After about an hour and twenty minutes, as we would begin our descent into the McAllen airport, I would look out the window and the McAllen airport began to look bigger and bigger.

If after landing, I would have said to you, “guess what? The McAllen airport is bigger than the DFW airport. I saw DFW getting smaller and the McAllen one getting bigger with my own eyes.” You would immediately correct me and say, “Nope! Neither the DFW nor the McAllen airport changed in size while you were on that flight. The only thing that changed was your perspective. You were the one moving.”

Over the last three decades or so, people have shifted their political views. There are many Baptists who have moved to a narrower and stricter way of being Baptists, closing their ranks. You might say they have moved further to the right. Other Baptists have moved in the other direction. They have become open and affirming. They moved further to the left.

From the perspective of both of those extremes, BGCT and yours truly seem to have moved. That's why so-called progressives call us “fundamentalists” and ultra conservatives call us “liberals.” They moved so their perception of us has changed.

But the reality is Texas Baptists have not moved. We are where we have been for decades. We are committed to the authority, infallibility, inspiration, and trustworthiness of the Bible, “the truth without any mixture of error.”

That's where we stood when Dr. Bill Pinson was executive director, when Dr. Charles Wade was executive director, when Dr. Randel Everett was executive director, when Dr. David Hardage was executive director, and that's where we stand now.

Texas Baptists have held to the view that the role of women in ministry is a local church matter not a state convention matter. That's where BGCT stood under the leadership of Dr. Pinson, Dr. Wade, Dr. Everett, and Dr. Hardage. That is where we stand now.

Texas Baptists have upheld the historical Baptist distinctive of religious liberty. Both the 1963 and the 2000 BFM state that "church and state should be separate." They further declare that "a free church in a free state is the Christian ideal." We believe in religious liberty for all, not just for Baptists, not just for Christians, but for all people. That's where we have been for decades. That is where we stand now.

BGCT has been clear on our stance regarding human sexuality, believing the biblical teaching to be that sex is a gift from God to be enjoyed in the covenant relationship between one man and one woman as husband and wife, and that any sexual activity outside of that design is sinful. That has been the historical position and it has been affirmed by messengers on more than one occasion in word and action. This is not new. We have not moved!

We are a centrist convention. That means we are orthodox in our theology, or as one of my predecessors expressed it, "we are conservative, we're just not angry about it." We hold to historical Baptist distinctives. We uphold the priesthood of all believers, the autonomy of the local church, and the voluntary cooperation of churches who share the Baptist confession.

We may sense pressure from the extreme right and from the extreme left to move closer to them. But we are committed to our historical position on these matters and others.

Texas needs the BGCT. North America needs the BGCT. There are plenty of Baptists on the extreme right. There are many Baptists on the extreme left. We need to be a family for those who are conservative but not always looking for new battles.

We need to be a home for those who, like Isaiah, have a convictional commitment in challenging times.

About three years ago I was being interviewed by the executive director search committee. My interest in being recommended for this role did not come out of a desire to be popular or to please everyone.

When this board voted to hire me as your executive director my motivation for taking this role was not about picking fights or finding battles. I realize this job carries the responsibility of dealing with difficult matters and making difficult decisions. I am not afraid of those.

But the ultimate reason I accepted this job is because one day I heard the Lord on the heavenly throne, high and exalted, call me and I said, *"Here am I. Send me."* My commitment to you is that I will lead us as a convention to be a sent people, a people who live out the Great Commandment and the Great Commission.

I want to be a leader who leads with **convictional commitment in challenging times** for the sake of the lost, for the sake of God's mission, for the sake of the glory of God among the nations. That's my commitment to you.