

Bullock urges renewed renovation in the Baptist house

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PLAINVIEW—Karen Bullock explored Baptist beginnings, heritage and challenges, calling for renewed housekeeping, as the Baptist historian addressed the William Pinson Lecture Series audience April 10 at Wayland Baptist University.

Using Psalm 48:13-14 as her backdrop, Bullock presented *This Old House at 415: Letters from the Family*—approaching 415 years of Baptist history through the context of a house.

“Baptists were not always a sprawling, flourishing family. In our early days, we were immigrants,” she said as she spoke of the “time of great upheaval” and “much suffering” that led to the beginning of the Baptist faith.

“They were bound by law to accept their monarch’s changing doctrines about God, salvation, baptism and ultimate authority,” Bullock said. “They had no choices. They were arrested, fined and even put to death for questioning.

“Religious freedom? There was none. Baptists emerged in this volatile, chaotic time, knowing both the hope and the cost of following Christ. ... They founded the first Baptist church, based upon believer’s baptism, in 1609 and wrote letters—our family letters—to explain their actions.”

“Baptists could not worship together except in attic-garret-rooms,” she continued. “The family left records, letters, to tell us what happened. ... These relatives in our family story knew that in order to find life they had to lose it; that the call of Christ to follow him meant obedience, even though faithfulness guaranteed neither safety nor mortal life itself.”

Bullock described the “Baptist house” as a hexagon, identifying six clusters of beliefs—authority of Scripture alone, believer’s baptism, the priesthood of all believers, the separation of church and state, local church autonomy, and support for missions, evangelism and social Christianity.

Six clusters of belief

“The authority of Scripture identifier stands in contradistinction to creeds, dogmas, culture, reason, traditions or science,” she said. “This tenet includes the trinitarian Godhead, the person and work of Christ—virgin-born, sinless life, death, burial and resurrection, and bodily second coming—and salvation by grace through faith alone.”

Bullock said the second cluster, believer’s baptism, derives from the authority of Scripture and has two aspects—meaning and mode.

“Baptism takes place following repentance and confession of faith in Jesus Christ. It is a sign of obedience to Christ. It symbolizes Christ’s Lordship over our lives. It is a true identifier, as opposed to infant baptism,” she said. “Baptism is a picture of salvation—death, burial and resurrection.”

Addressing the third cluster, the priesthood of all believers, Bullock said this doctrine “does not support human self-sufficiency, independence from Scripture or moral ability apart from Christ.” She added that it does mean “no human priest is needed to intercede for us in matters of personal faith or for forgiveness of sin.”

Bullock focused on the “God-given right of all creatures to respond to their Creator without coercion” as she turned to the fourth identifier—separation of church and state.

“To persecute another for religious belief cuts across the biblical teaching that true faith is personal and voluntary,” she said.

Speaking to local church autonomy, the fifth cluster, Bullock said, “This belief derives from the Scriptural teaching that the Holy Spirit resides in each believer’s life, giving spiritual gifts for the church, empowering, transforming, revealing truth to believers—individually and corporately—and desiring the unity of the church.”

Bullock said “salvation has both individual and corporate dimensions” as she addressed the sixth identifier of missions, evangelism and social Christianity.

“We cannot support evangelism while ignoring hurting people. Neither can physical, emotional, educational, medical or human needs be addressed holistically without the gospel message,” she said. “Three essential elements are at work in this cluster: evangelism, church planting and discipleship, and social justice ministries.”

The bones are still solid

Bullock addressed concerns, noting, “Standing on the curb across from the Baptist home, one can mark the changes the years have brought—not all of them positive.”

She said as time has evolved “specialized groups of Baptists have emphasized one or more of our clusters of beliefs. They have added rooms, erected sheds, cleared tent spaces in the back lawns, added upper stories, pushed walls out to the sides, and from some perspectives, caused this old house to be all but unrecognizable.”

She also said not all spaces in the Baptist house are characterized as wholesome.

“Some have been, and still are shady, unethical, even immoral, and can hardly be said to align with Christian biblical values today or the six

clusters for which Baptists have historically stood,” she said. “Ugly graffiti has been sprayed on our house’s walls—letters we wish were not there.”

Addressing challenges, Bullock said, “During the demolition phase, walls come down and foundations are laid bare. The negligence of the occupants, over time, is exposed. The stability of the foundation is assessed. The debris may then be cleared away, and the renovation may take place.”

This demolition has taken place and is continuing, she said.

“What the process has revealed is that ... the six cluster-sided-foundation and bones of this old house at 415 Baptist Way are still solid,” she said.

“This large, worldwide family that lives here still agrees on and adheres to the six clusters upon which it has stood for more than four centuries.... Diversity? Yes, indeed. Historically focused on the gospel? Yes. Growing and taking steps forward? Yes. Perfect? No. We still fall short of God’s glory and purposes.”

“Could we allow God to do some serious and thorough spring cleaning? Could we, as a family, bow in humility, and be willing for his reconstruction, renovation, and reformation?” she asked. “It would not require burning down, giving up, or abandoning the Baptist house, or what we believe historically to be right—this six-sided foundation.”

Concluding, Bullock said: “May we determine afresh to demolish self-centeredness, pride and power schemes. ... May we expose once again the beautiful beams of this old house to support, in even greater measure, true discipleship, missions, justice and untainted gospel witness. May we dust the chandeliers so that the light from within our house may shine to the world.

“Letters from this old house beckon us from its very foundations,” Bullock said as she quoted Psalm 127:1—“Unless the Lord builds the house, those

who build it labor in vain.”

The annual William Pinson Lecture Series rotates among nine educational institutions affiliated with the Baptist General Convention of Texas and is designed to bring awareness of Baptist heritage and distinctiveness.

Bullock served as distinguished professor of Christian heritage and director of the Ph.D. program at B.H. Carrol Theological Seminary from 2007 until her retirement in 2023.