

*Remarks to the
Bethel Baptist Church 126th Anniversary Celebration
October 14, 2001*

Thank you, Pastor Coleman, for the invitation to be here with you this morning to help celebrate the 126th anniversary of Bethel Baptist Church.

As a community of faith, this church has served the people of Mississippi well. I thank you for your leadership and for your commitment to doing the good work of our Lord.

Let me begin this morning with a few words about where we are as a nation and as a people. In this great country of ours, based on the premise that “In God We Trust,” we have been drawn together like never before.

America was knocked down, but we were not knocked out.

Since September 11, when terrorism struck our land quickly and violently, we have seen the very best of our country. We have seen the true meaning of “the United States of America.”

On that horrible day, people across the land were lining up to donate blood. Volunteer firefighters were jumping into their trucks and driving to New York and Washington to help.

And, in the days since, we have seen a renewal in the church that has reminded us, once again, where we draw our strength and our comfort.

I had the opportunity a few weeks ago to visit New York and Washington. In New York, we met with a group of firefighters – the members of Ladder Company 3 – a company that lost 12 good men.

I was struck by the strength of these men, a strength drawn from the knowledge that an entire nation mourned with them and their brothers were at peace.

And in Washington, we stood about 50 yards from the impact site of the Pentagon. It was an ugly and sobering sight, and I tried to imagine the fear and panic of that day – knowing full well it couldn't be done.

Thousands of people died on September 11. They were mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, husbands and wives. They were people who simply went to work or got on a plane. They were victims of horrible acts.

But I take comfort in the words of the seventh chapter of Revelation: “For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to the springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

And now, our country is at war – seeking justice for crimes committed against innocent men, women and children. I believe it is important for us to work to rid our world of the kind of terrorism that hit us on September 11.

I believe we can and will do it through a strong coalition of nations who have simply had enough of those who would rain terror on the innocent.

We will do it by demonstrating to the world that America is a country of great compassion. We are already increasing our humanitarian aid to the people of Afghanistan who are suffering under the cruel repression of the Taliban.

Here in America, President Bush has called on us all to respect the millions of Muslim-Americans who adhere to the true tenets of Islam, a peaceful and tolerant religion.

I echo that call. America is built on a foundation of principles, one of which is the freedom of religion. Now more than ever, we must show the world that America is more than a geographic landmass; it is an ideal for others to follow.

Because of that ideal, the Bethel Baptist Church has been able to do the great work of the church for 126 years.

This congregation's influence extends beyond the boundaries of Fulton and Itawamba County, and it does so because your commitment to sharing the word of God with the world.

You may be based here in Fulton, but your words and your deeds are carried well beyond.

That is what we celebrate here today.

Benjamin Franklin once wrote of how many people observe Christ's birthday, but how few observe his teachings. "It is easier to keep holidays than commandments," he wrote.

Through your work, more people are observing those commandments. It is difficult work; all we have to do is read the Gospels to know how true this is – the word of God, through Jesus, was not always easily accepted by the people. We cannot expect it to always be easily accepted from us.

Nevertheless, the work must be done. That is the task we have as Christians, as people of God.

We work to bring people to the church, to God, to help them right what is wrong in their lives. In many ways, Bertrand Russell tells us, it's a little like being an auto mechanic.

When a car doesn't work right, we don't say to it, "you're a bad car, and I'm not going to give you any more gas until you run right."

We troubleshoot; we try to find out what's not working right, and fix it.

It's the same way with our fellow man. We must be patient in the work of the church.

We must reach out to those who need our help, find out what's wrong in their lives, and help them fix their lives by bringing them to the church.

At every level – as individuals, as a community of faith, as a state and a nation – we bear a responsibility as Christians to help others.

Now, more than ever, that responsibility affects us as a nation.

I want to share something with you that was written 38 years ago.

“We in this country, in this generation, are – by destiny rather than choice – the watchmen on the walls of freedom. We ask, therefore, that we may be worthy of our power and responsibility, that we may exercise our strength with wisdom and restraint, and that we may achieve in our time and for all time the ancient vision of ‘peace on earth, goodwill toward men.’

“That must always be our goal, and the righteousness of our cause must always underlie our strength. For as was written long ago, ‘except the Lord keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain.’”

As I said, those words were written 38 years ago, and I believe they are very timely today. They were written for a speech that was never given, a speech scheduled for November 22, 1963, a speech scheduled to be delivered by President John Kennedy.

I pray that we are worthy of our power and our responsibility. I pray we may exercise our strength with wisdom and restraint.

And, I pray for peace on earth.

I thank God for what we have in this state and in this country. I thank him for the work you do every day, just as you have for the past 126 years.

I know this good work will continue, and I look forward to what you accomplish.

May God bless you on this special day, and God bless America.

