In the 1920s, a controversy ensued over compulsory Bible reading in the public schools of Virginia. A bill was introduced in the General Assembly that would have compelled teachers to read verses from the King James Version of the Bible at the schools’ daily opening exercises. Teachers failing to comply would be disciplined.

The 1925 meeting of the Baptist General Association of Virginia adopted a resolution stating that compulsory Bible-reading is “an invasion of the rights of conscience” and asking the legislature “not to enact any law which would lay even the least restriction upon the free conscience of any individual.”

In February 1926, the Virginia Senate held a hearing on the bill, but with little notice there was no time for Baptists to organize against it. Instead, one person, George White McDaniel, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Richmond and president of the Southern Baptist Convention, spoke on their behalf against the bill. As a result, the bill was pushed aside. Part of what McDaniel said is as follows:

“The desire to require the reading of the Bible is well meaning but misconceived. The United States has made one distinctive contribution to civilization: the separation of church and state. The State has no religious function.

Religion is purely voluntary. God does not compel anyone to hear or believe. What God does not do, man dare not attempt. Religion is a thing between the soul and God. It is of
such a personal, spiritual, sacred nature, that government must not touch it. It is so vital and vigorous that it does not lean upon the prop of the State.

The bill violates the rights of those teachers who cannot conscientiously comply with the law. … It places the reading of the Bible in the hands of those who may not believe the Bible. … Though there can be no comment, the general manner and tone of the reader’s voice may undermine the child’s faith in the Bible.

It wrongs some of the children whom it is mistakenly intended to benefit. … One of the surest ways to give a child a revulsion for religion is to try and enforce it upon him. Pastor though I am, I would not compel any children to listen to the reading of the Bible. I would reason with them, try to persuade them, and appeal to their conscience, but force them – never!”

From Fred Anderson, My Dear Doctor Mac: The Life & Times of George White McDaniel (Richmond, VA: Virginia Baptist Historical Society, 2012), 322-28. The original script is in the McDaniel Papers at the VBHS. The BGAV resolution can be found in the BGAV Annual for 1925, pp. 102-03.

Fred Anderson, executive director of the Virginia Baptist Historical Society, is retiring in June 2017 after serving for 38 years. We’re sharing a few of his adapted stories about Virginia Baptists’ rich legacy. For the full stories, visit BGAV.org/Fred.