

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

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Words

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Editor's note: This is Dr. Robbins' Commencement Address at the 70th Commencement of Faith Theological Seminary, Baltimore, Maryland, May 19, 2007.

President Manohar, distinguished Faculty of Faith Theological Seminary, honored Guests, Graduates, Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is an honor and a privilege to appear before you today as the commencement speaker for the 70th graduating class of Faith Theological Seminary. Thank you very much for inviting me to address you.

As an institution, Faith Theological Seminary has had a long, productive, and colorful history. Its sons include some of the prominent names of American Protestantism of the 20th Century: the prolific apologist Francis Schaeffer; Kenneth Kantzer, editor of *Christianity Today*; Vernon Grounds and Gordon Lewis of Denver Seminary; and many lesser known scholars and writers.

But more important than its past is its promise for the future. It is my prayer that Faith Seminary will flourish so long as and only so long as it believes and teaches the whole counsel of God. In an age in which many Christian churches and institutions have departed from the faith and are striving for the acceptance, respect, and admiration of the world, it is crucial for those that have not fallen away to remain steadfast in the Lord, always abounding in his work. One thing America does not need is another apostate seminary; it has hundreds of them already.

Commencements are festive occasions on which schools invite guests to visit and address their faculty and graduates. These commencement speakers – and there have been millions of them over the centuries – are expected to do certain things: First, they are expected to tell jokes and anecdotes, and humor has its place, even in Scripture; second, they are supposed to tell the graduates how wonderful they are, and genuine achievements are not to be overlooked; and, finally, they are expected to tell graduates to go out and make a difference in the world. I propose to do none of those things this afternoon. Let me explain why.

I have not come to entertain you. As an entertainer, I leave a lot to be desired. And if it is entertainment you want, you would have been much better served by hiring some local Maryland talent than by summoning me all the way from Tennessee. I hope you were not misled into thinking that all Tennesseans are entertainers, simply because our state has produced many

famous entertainers, such as Tennessee Ernie Ford, Dolly Parton, Steve Green, Peyton Manning, just about every country singer you can name, and last but not least, Vice President Al Gore, who was recently awarded an Oscar by the entertainment industry. Mr. Gore has been entertaining the nation for decades; his recognition by Hollywood is long overdue.

Further, I have not come here to praise you; those who know you much better than I, can and will praise you more credibly, more sincerely, and more thoroughly than I could. Achievements such as yours are not to be ignored or overlooked; and that is why the Seminary has gone to great trouble to honor you today.

Finally, I have not come to unctuously exhort you to “think positively” and to “make a difference in the world.” This spring thousands of commencement speakers will be urging millions of graduates to “make a difference” in their communities, their nations, and the world. Now, any fool can make a difference. In November 1963, Lee Harvey Oswald made a difference in the world when he murdered President John Kennedy. In 1848 two unknown writers, one a recent Ph.D. in Germany and the other an English businessman, made a difference in the world when they published *The Communist Manifesto*. And just last month, an English major at the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University made a difference in his community by murdering 32 students and professors, the latest and worst mass murder at an American government institution.

Of course, someone will say, they mean make a difference for good. But the problem with many commencement speakers is that their messages, while entertaining and flattering, are vague and vacuous when it comes to telling graduates what good is. They tell young people to make a difference in their communities, but they cannot offer anything more than humor, bromides, and unsupported personal opinion as guidance. It would appear that most of them have nothing of substance to say, and so hide that fact behind a screen of humor and flattery. And it is true: Apart from the Word of God, commencement speakers can offer no sound ethical guidance to graduates at all. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and in the absence of that fear, wisdom cannot even begin.

I can still remember my various graduation exercises – from high school, college, and graduate school. But I cannot remember a single thing the commencement speakers said. Thirty years from now, you may not remember a single thing I say here today either. As an idealistic young man I wanted my life to count for something, to mean something. I know you want

your lives to count for something, too. And that is what I wish to speak to you about today – not my own opinions on how to make your life count for something, but what God, that is, Scripture, says about the matter.

In the Scriptures, you might be surprised to learn, there are several graduation addresses. Of course, we know of no Christian seminaries in the first century; the churches themselves were the institutions of learning. When Paul rented a house in Rome and lectured on theology for two years, everyone was welcome to attend his lectures. The church, as Paul wrote in his first letter to Timothy, is the pillar and ground of the truth. And it is in the church that we find the best commencement addresses.

In that same letter, the elderly Paul, an apostle, officer, and principal teacher of the first generation of the church, who expected soon to depart from his body in order to be present with his Lord, tells the young Timothy, an officer and teacher of the second generation of the church, how to be a good servant of Jesus Christ: “If you instruct the brethren in these things, you will be a good servant of Jesus Christ, nourished in the words of faith and of the good doctrine which you have carefully followed” (1 Timothy 4:6).

Please notice Paul’s emphasis: In this one short sentence he mentions instruction, teaching, words, and doctrine. “If you instruct the brethren,” he begins. The primary and essential purpose of the church and church officers is instruction, that is, teaching, communicating information from one person to another. Today, seminaries, churches, and churchgoers believe that a good pastor is a spellbinding orator, an entertainer, an effective fundraiser, a compassionate social worker, a proficient business manager, a discussion facilitator, a worship leader, a pal for young people, and an all-round cheerleader.

But Paul says a good pastor is an instructor, a teacher. That is why he tells Timothy that Elders must be married men who are able to teach. In his list of qualifications for Elders, Paul says not a word about being able to play the piano, guitar, or organ; nor about being proficient at raising money, organizing soup kitchens, nor capturing audiences with eloquent speeches.

Paul has much more to say to Timothy and to us: “If you instruct the brethren in these things....” A good servant of Jesus Christ must be an instructor, but not simply an instructor: He must be an instructor in a certain subject, namely, “these things.” Since Paul writes these words in the fourth chapter of 1 Timothy, the things to which he refers are all the doctrines he has mentioned and will mention in his letter: things such as the purpose of the law; the Gospel; rules for godly worship; civil duties; qualifications for both orders of permanent church officers, Elders and Deacons; warnings against false doctrine, false teachers, and apostates; and so on. His concern is that the brethren be taught, and that they be taught the whole counsel of God. This means that Christianity is taught, not caught. Christianity is words; it is doctrine. It is a religion of knowledge and of the mind. It is completely and thoroughly rational. It is not a religion of the senses, the will, the imagination, or the emotions. Pagan religions appeal to the senses, the will, the imagination, and the emotions. They have cunningly devised fables, pomp and processions, icons, statues, rituals, bells, wonders, mysteries, and incense; but Christianity is not paganism.

A few churches and pastors admit that teaching is important, but they do not want to be restricted in what they teach. Paul’s language is restrictive: If you instruct the brethren in “these things” – the doctrines Paul has written about, the doctrines of

Scripture – you will be a good servant of Jesus Christ. But today many pastors and churches prefer to teach other things: psychology and sociology, socialist economics, Thomistic philosophy, evidentialist apologetics, and church tradition. They are not good servants of Jesus Christ. One must neither add to nor subtract from the Word of God in one’s preaching.

Paul adds that if Timothy teaches all these things to the brethren, he will be a good servant of Jesus Christ, “nourished by the words of faith....” A good Christian servant, the Holy Spirit says, is nourished by words. In order to instruct the brethren, the good servant must read the words of Scripture, study them, meditate on them, and organize them into sermons and essays, perhaps even into books. He must, that means, be a systematic theologian. Paul tells Timothy to “give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine.... Meditate on these things; give yourself entirely to them, that your progress may be evident to all. Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you” (1 Timothy 4:13-16).

These commands to pay attention – to focus – on reading, on exhortation, and on doctrine are central to the work of a Christian pastor. Without this focus, he ceases to be a Christian pastor. If his mind wanders, he ceases to be a Christian pastor. The command to meditate immediately follows the command to focus, and Biblical meditation does not mean emptying the mind of thought, as it does in pagan religions; it means filling the mind with God’s thoughts, which are revealed only in Scripture. By focusing on Scripture, one fills one’s mind with God’s thought, and by meditating on those thoughts, one grows in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ. Christianity is not an anti-intellectual religion, as pagan religions are. The Bible commands us to seek and to love the truth, to memorize, to understand, and to believe the words that God has written for our learning in the Scriptures.

“Meditate on these things,” Paul commands, the same things that the good servant must teach the brethren. “Give yourself entirely to them” – please notice that word “entirely” – that is, avoid merely human philosophies, traditions, practices, and ideas, and think about the doctrines that God has revealed. This is not a command to avoid gainful employment, as some commentators have suggested – keep in mind that Paul himself was a tentmaker and was not violating this commandment – it is a command to find the source of all your thinking in Scripture alone, to recognize Scripture as the only source of truth and knowledge. It is this truth, this Christian doctrine, Paul says, echoing James, that is able to save your soul. There is no salvation apart from the intellectually understood and believed Biblical doctrine. Christ is the Truth, and unless we understand and believe the truth, we are not part of Christ.

Today there are many seminary professors, church teachers, and churchgoers who express their revulsion to doctrine and words. Truth is personal, not propositional, they whine. Religion is encounter and relationship, not information and belief. Words, they say, are dead. Doctrine is head knowledge, not heart knowledge. What we need, they say, is feelings and actions, not words. We need to feel dependent, or awe-struck, or loved.

The Bible, from beginning to end, opposes such anti-intellectualism and irrationalism. Jesus says that Heaven and Earth will pass away, but his words will never pass away: They are eternal (Matthew 24:35). Peter confesses that Jesus alone has the words of eternal life (John 6:68). Please notice that it is the words that give eternal life. The words give life because they are life: Jesus says “my words are Spirit, and they are life” (John 6:63). Nowhere in the Bible does Peter or anyone else say that

Jesus has the feelings of eternal life, and nowhere does Jesus or anyone else in the Bible command anyone to seek heart knowledge rather than head knowledge. In fact, the Bible says the heart is the head: It is the heart that thinks, remembers, believes, plans, and reasons. Writing to Timothy, the Apostle Paul says that it is the words of the faith – the revealed words – that “nourish” the good servant of Jesus Christ. All the sheep, those in the pews as well as those in the pulpits, the ordained as well as the unordained, are nourished, fed, by the words of truth. That is why Christ repeatedly told Peter to “Feed my sheep.” Feeding is a figure of speech that means “teach.” It is only words that nourish.

In chapter 6 of *First Timothy*, Paul repeats his statements to make them even more emphatic: “If anyone teaches otherwise and does not consent to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which accords with godliness, he is proud, knowing nothing....” Those who do not consent to wholesome words, Paul writes, are arrogant know-nothings. If Paul were writing his epistles in the 21st Century, rather than the first, he would undoubtedly be harassed by the ecclesiastical thought police and subjected to church discipline for being harsh and unloving. So we must decide who is right, the Apostle Paul, who tells us that we need words and doctrine, that is, truth; or contemporary teachers who tell us what we need are rituals, relationships, feelings, sincerity, and a warm heart. The Apostle Paul tells us what Christianity is; anything else is not Christianity.

These words in Scripture and my words to you make it clear that your job, as Christians and as graduates of Faith Theological Seminary, is not to “make a difference” in your community or in the world, but to accurately and boldly teach the words of God. While Paul’s words are directed primarily to church officers, they apply to all Christians. Paul says that “If anyone” – anyone, he says – “teaches otherwise and does not consent to wholesome words,...he is proud, knowing nothing.” If you are not an Elder or never become an Elder, you are still under divine obligation to teach the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. In your conversations with your neighbors, speak the words of truth. In teaching your children, speak the words of truth. In writing a letter to the newspaper, write the words of truth. It is truth, the words of God, which never fails to accomplish its purpose, which never returns empty. It is that truth that will change the world, not you. You are only a vessel, only an instrument, of God’s truth. It is only in speaking the words of truth that your life will count for something. Paul puts it this way in *1 Corinthians* 15: “Be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.” Your labor is not in vain, if and only if it is in the Lord.

In his various addresses in Scripture, the Apostle Paul never urges anyone to “make a difference” in their world; he always commands them to proclaim the revealed words of Scripture accurately, boldly, and clearly – to do the work of the Lord. Because churches and churchmen today despise the intellect and hate knowledge, they deny the power of God’s words and the power of the Gospel. They have a form of godliness but deny the power of godliness, which is the Gospel. Paul wrote to the Romans: “I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes” (*Romans* 1:16). Paul understood something that many, even most, church officers and churchgoers do not understand: It is the Gospel alone that changes individuals and societies for the better. Christ said, “Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things shall be added unto you” (*Matthew* 6:33). There is no other way, and you have no other mandate.

In *Acts* 20 we read that Paul summoned the Elders of the Ephesian church together for a meeting in Miletus. He opened the meeting by reviewing what he had done in Ephesus, “serving the Lord with all humility.” What form did that service take? Did Paul do any of the things that churches today consider to be service to the Lord? He did not. Paul tells us: “I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house, testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks.” Paul “kept back nothing” – he taught the whole counsel of God. He taught both publicly and privately. He taught both Jews and Gentiles. He taught God’s words despite “tears and trials and plotting of the Jews.” Now Paul was on his way to Jerusalem, the stronghold of the hostile Jewish establishment, and he does not know what will happen to him there, except that the Holy Spirit has warned him of chains and tribulations. Paul has called the Ephesian Elders together to tell them good-bye, and how he says it is instructive for us all. Paul writes: “And indeed now I know that you all, among whom I have gone preaching the Kingdom of God, will see my face no more. Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God.”

Paul makes it emphatically clear that the first duty of the Christian is to teach the words of truth. He makes it clear that he is innocent of the blood of all men because he had taught the whole counsel of God to all men, both Jews and non-Jews. This means, among other things, that if you wish to be innocent of the blood of all men, you also must declare the whole counsel of God to all men. One becomes a good pastor by teaching the whole counsel of God, and one becomes guilty by failing to teach it. It is the duty of the church officer, the Christian teacher, to teach the entire counsel of God. Because Paul has declared God’s whole counsel, and because the Ephesians have received it, they are now responsible for declaring it. Therefore, Paul begins his next sentence with a “Therefore”:

“Therefore,” Paul writes, “take heed to yourselves” – notice that the Bible endorses rational self-interest – “and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which he purchased with his own blood.” The church is not the domain of its officers; it is the purchase and property of Christ, and officers are responsible for taking care of it, not lording it over Christ’s sheep. They are to feed them: to teach them the words of truth.

Because truth and words are so important, Paul warns the Ephesian Elders in the most graphic language about false teachers: “I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.” Paul says he knows this. Not only has he already encountered and confronted false teachers in the churches, but the Holy Spirit has warned him about what will happen after his decease. Outsiders will come into the church, pretending, of course, to be sheep, and they will destroy the flock. They will teach false doctrines, confuse the sheep, and divide the flock. The Bible has many warnings about false teachers, false prophets, and wolves in the churches. Virtually every book of the Bible contains some such warning. But it is rare today to hear any warning in the churches about false teaching, and still rarer to hear false teaching and false teachers identified by name. Today such behavior is regarded as harsh and unloving. But what is unloving is failing to warn the sheep about false teachers and false teaching.

Paul warns the Ephesians that the danger is not just from newcomers: “Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after

themselves.” These perverse men are already in the church, Paul warns, and they will teach false doctrine, confuse the sheep, and draw away the disciples after them. In his letters Paul names names of false teachers who have opposed him. But he realizes that the problem of false teachers will be a continuing problem in the churches, and that good pastors will always have the duty, not only of teaching of the truth, but also of discerning falsehood and warning the sheep against false teachers.

Today the churches have been inundated by false teaching: Roman Catholicism is flourishing with more than one billion souls under its control; earlier this month the president of the Evangelical Theological Society became a Roman Catholic. Pentecostalism and the Charismatic movement, which deny the Biblical and Reformational doctrines of *sola scriptura* and *sola fide*, are leading 600 million more souls to Hell. Eastern Orthodoxy, with its doctrine of theosis, fatally deceives 350 million more. Liberalism and Neo-orthodoxy, tracing their roots to Schleiermacher, Kierkegaard, and Barth, devour hundreds of millions more souls. Here in the United States a new movement, the Emergent Church, draws its inspiration from medieval Romanism and mysticism. All of these false religions – all of which profess to be Christian – have many things in common, and those things all depend on one fundamental idea: a rejection of the words of God. From outright and blatant denials of Scripture to subtle attacks on words and language as being incapable of expressing divine truth, these false teachings disparage words and propositions, and praise paradox, mystery, action, feelings, images, and institutions.

Please note that Paul’s warning to the Ephesians is about false teachers in the churches. In his last words to them, he tells them what he deems most important. He does not mention those who oppose the faith outside the churches; he does not mention philosophers or vociferous atheists or other organized religions, or even tyrannical rulers. Paul sees the greatest threat to the church as being the threat from within, the threat from those who are church members and church leaders. The greatest threat, he says, is that the words of truth will be perverted, corrupted, and twisted by teachers in the church itself. Today the churches have reversed Paul’s concern and warning, for they focus on threats without and ignore the threats within. They focus on atheism and humanism within the public schools, on the actions of government, on political and social issues. When they do address doctrinal issues, the threat, they say, is always outside their church. It is difficult to remember the last time anyone was tried for any error in a Baptist or Presbyterian church.

In his valedictory address to the Ephesians, Paul’s sole concern is for the purity of the preaching in the churches. Paul realizes that it is the Word of God that is powerful, that it is the Gospel that grants eternal life, and that if the Word of God is preserved in its purity, then it will not only protect the church but will act as salt in society. But if the Word of God is lost or perverted, then there is no hope, no matter how many rallies are organized, petitions signed, or political actions Christians take.

“Therefore,” Paul commands the Ephesians, “watch.” Watch out for the wolves, watch out for the false doctrine, protect the sheep from every teaching that is not Biblical. Equip the sheep to recognize the false doctrine and the savage wolves on their own. “Remember,” Paul says, “that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears.” Paul taught the whole counsel of God as if the lives of men depended on it – precisely because they did.

In our profoundly anti-intellectual age, many in the churches no longer believe that the eternal destinations of men – their

everlasting happiness or misery – depend on what they think. Instead, the anti-intellectuals tell us that the destiny of men depends on the group to which they belong, how they behave, or what they feel. God, they tell us, would not send anyone to Hell for making a mistake in theology. If the person is sincere, then God will save him. If a person sincerely believes that Mary is co-Redemptrix, or that Venus is a Goddess, or that Mohammad or Benedict XVI is a prophet, God will forgive him. C. S. Lewis, for example, taught that all sincere worship, even that directed to an idol, is honored by God. His many disciples teach the same. But God and Paul command us to understand and believe the words of God. It was not Paul’s tears that saved the Ephesians, but the words from God that Paul spoke to them – the eternal words of eternal life that are able to save your souls also.

In his intercessory prayer in *John 17*, Jesus said, “This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I have glorified you on the Earth. I have finished the work which you have given me to do.” What was this work, and how did Christ glorify God on the Earth? Christ himself explains: “I have given to them the words which you have given me; and they have received them, and have known surely that I came forth from you; and they have believed that you sent me.... I have given them your Word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.”

Jesus’ assigned work was to give the disciples the words which he had received from the Father. That is how he glorified God on the Earth, and that is the only way you can glorify God on the Earth. The glorification of God is the proclamation of his words – accurately, boldly, clearly, and completely.

God’s words have been written in the Bible alone. We do not find them in philosophy, or in science, or in poetry. We do not learn them from the sky, or from fossils, or from our neighbors. Because the Bible alone has the words of knowledge, the words of eternal life, your first duty is to give attention to the Scriptures. Read them constantly; read the Bible from cover to cover. In this way, as Paul says, you will save both yourself and those who hear you teach. Second, when you read Christian books, read them carefully. Most books that claim to be Christian today are not. They are subtle, and sometimes blatant, attacks on Christianity. Consign to the flames any book that says words, understanding, and the mind are of secondary importance. Third, read sound Christian books, and recommend them to others. I can recommend no author more highly than the late Dr. Gordon Clark, for he clearly saw the importance of words. He wrote more than 40 books in both theology and philosophy, and the guiding principle in them all is that the Bible alone is the words of God, the only source of truth and knowledge. It is that truth alone that is powerful to save souls and transform societies. Fourth, equip those who hear you to understand and teach the Scriptures clearly. If, after 10 years of laboring in a certain church there is no one there capable of filling your shoes, you need to re-think what you are doing. Paul spent only three years in Ephesus, and he left behind a flourishing church and many Elders. Rather than continuing the Roman Catholic model of one priest in one parish, we need to recognize that the goal of a pastor is to teach the men in the congregations to be pastors, to equip them for the work of the ministry. Much more teaching than one man can do is needed in every congregation.

If you do not do these things, you will be good for nothing, and your life will be wasted. But if you do these things, Paul writes, you will be a good servant of Jesus Christ. May God bless you and keep you as teach.