

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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Molding Men

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Honored graduates of the Class of 1986, proud parents and relatives, friends:

It is customary every year at graduation time to ask someone who is older and presumably wiser than the graduates to speak to them for a few minutes and give them the benefit of his wisdom. I am here today, not because I am wiser, but because I am older than the graduates, and I also happen to be well connected to this graduating class. So graduates, if, twenty years from now, you want to give a commencement address, remember that it helps to have connections. That is my first piece of advice.

I would like to begin my talk with a horror story. Unlike the horror stories that appear on television or in the movies, this is a true horror story, and one that you may not have heard. I doubt that it has been on TV.

In China, the art of molding men was developed hundreds of years ago. The practitioners of this ancient art would take a child two or three years old, place him in a porcelain vase, sometimes a vase grotesque in shape. Only the child's head and possibly his feet would protrude from the vase. The child would be kept in that vase for years, standing in the daytime, sometimes reclining at night to sleep. All the while his small and pliable body would be growing and filling the contours of the vase with flesh and bones. After several years in the vase, the child's body took on the shape of the vase and the child became a grotesque, misshapen human

monster. The child became as twisted as the vase, and the damage to his body was irreparable.

When the practitioners of the art of molding men thought that the child's shape was permanent, they would break the vase and remove the child, now perhaps eight or ten years old. Before them was a helpless child shaped like a vase, a source of endless amusement for the noblemen of China.

We are horrified to learn that there could be men as cruel as that—men who could take little children and keep them imprisoned in a porcelain pot for years. We are angered by the idea of forcing helpless children to become human vases to be ridiculed by the rich men and rulers of China. We ought to be angry at such cruelty.

The world, however, does something far worse to children than deforming their bodies. But because the world's work is not obvious, because it is not visible, because it does not offend our eyes, almost everyone—including many who profess to be Christians—either are not aware of the savagery of the world, or are not concerned by it. The world does not put infants into vases to mangle their bodies and turn them into monsters for the amusement of the rich; in fact, the world is very particular about the appearance of bodies in the 1980s. We are constantly reminded to eat the right foods, to get lots of the proper sort of exercise, and to buy and wear only the latest fashions. In America in 1986 we don't mangle bodies; we try to get them into shape.

The Chinese deformed the bodies of children; the world does something much worse: It deforms their minds. The world creates monsters of the mind. It twists, it malforms, it exerts great and unrelenting pressure on us all, but especially on the young, to conform to its shape. Sometimes this pressure is greater than at other times; the twelve years that most American children spend in government schools may be the time of greatest pressure, and it is exerted during those years when the minds of the children are the most pliable. But the American public school system is not the entire vase. The world is a great vase, and we are all in it. While the Chinese sought to twist the limbs of children, the world seeks to twist their thoughts. While the Chinese sought to keep children imprisoned in a porcelain vase until their deformity was irreparable, the world seeks to keep us in our sins until the last judgment. The world seeks to make each of us assume its own inhuman shape. And by ourselves, we are all as helpless in resisting the intellectual vase of the world as the Chinese children were in resisting the porcelain vases that imprisoned them.

Worst of all, because the vase of the world is not visible, but invisible, not physical but spiritual, we frequently don't even realize that we are being misshapen and deformed. We may, sinners that we are, even come to love our deformity; we may think that it is natural, that men are supposed to think like we do. If we profess to be Christians, we may even think that our twisted thoughts are the thoughts of God. We may think that those who do not conform to the world are fanatics who do not understand what the Bible says about peace and unity.

We are all in the world vase, but Christ commanded us not to take on its shape. As Christians, we are to be in the world, but not of it. At the end of this age, God will break the world vase, and we shall all emerge to plain view. Paul says in his letter to the Romans that the whole creation eagerly awaits the revealing of the sons of God. As I look around me today, quite frankly I don't see many people here who look like sons of God. I do not mean that as an insult; I am sure that I do not look like a son of God either. I look more like a son of Adam. But to those who believe in his name, God gives them the right to become sons of God. These sons of God will not

have assumed the shape of the world, but of God. They will not be conformed to this world, but conformed to the image of Christ. And at the end of this age, they will be revealed for what they are.

On the other hand, those who have conformed to the world will emerge from the vase as misshapen monsters, fit only to decorate that chamber of horrors known as Hell. Those who have assumed the shape of the world are vessels of wrath fitted for destruction.

For the past twelve years, graduates, you have been given the opportunity to attend a Christian school. Your parents have tried to conform your minds—that is, yourselves—to Christ, rather than to the world, by giving you a basic Christian education both at home and at school. You owe them a great debt for that. When I graduated from high school twenty years ago, there were no Christian schools to speak of. The Lutherans, because they were wiser than most other Christians, had always maintained their schools; but unless one's parents were Lutherans, you went to a public—a government—school. This generation has a head start on the previous generation. And that is the way it should be. Each generation should be better educated than the one before. Children ought not to lay up for their parents, but parents for their children. Some parents want to leave their children a financial inheritance, and they should, but they leave them no Christian inheritance; and the progress of the Gospel stops for a generation or more. Your generation has had an opportunity that mine, for the most part, did not have. Today there are thousands of Christian schools in America. Thousands more need to be built. But this month, unlike June of 1966, thousands of students will be graduating from Christian schools. By the grace of God, it will soon be millions.

Graduates, what you and your parents have so well begun, continue. Do not make the mistake of thinking that now that you have a basic Christian education, you can go learn what the world has to teach. That is one of the most deceptive arguments of the world, and many Christians, I'm afraid, have bought it. God commands us: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of

your mind." It is your mind that both God demands and the world deforms. The Bible has a great deal to say about the mind, the heart, the soul, the spirit, truth, knowledge, wisdom, and understanding—there are literally hundreds of references in the Scriptures to the mind. We are to be transformed by the renewing of our minds; we are to love God with all our minds—that is the first and great commandment—we are told that we have the mind of Christ; we are commanded to let Christ's mind be in us. Peter tells us in his second letter that God's divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness through the knowledge of God. All things, Peter says, come through theology, the knowledge of God. The Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.

I could continue with hundreds more examples, but I do not need to belabor the point that the mind is much more important than the body, despite what the materialists say; that a man profits nothing if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul, despite what the yuppies say; that a man is saved or lost, not by what he does, as religious people say, but by what he believes; that a man profits nothing if his body is in shape and his mind is deformed. Because we have been influenced (shaped) by the world, we are more horrified at the thought that the bodies of children were deliberately deformed by cruel tyrants than we are by the truth that the minds of children, and of adults as well, are being deliberately deformed by the world. Many Christians seem to have accepted the world's view that the body is more important than the soul, that that which is seen is more important than that which is not seen. They have, at least on this subject, been conformed to the world; and frequently they do not even realize that they have begun to look like the world vase.

How are we to obey Christ and keep from conforming to the shape of the world? There is only one way: Through the study of the Scriptures. God has given us a collection of sixty-six books to study so that we may take on the shape of Christ rather than the shape of the world. In his second letter to Timothy, Paul refers to "the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is given

by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work."

The Scriptures make us wise for salvation; we are not saved by having an emotional experience or by doing good deeds, but through the wisdom that comes to us in the Bible. The Gospel is the Good News about what Christ has done for his people. It is information given by God for us to understand and accept as true. This information is true and complete. By studying the Bible, the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work—not partially equipped, nor equipped for some good works. He needs no other source of information and guidance.

When you think about it, this is an extraordinary claim. The Bible claims to have a monopoly on truth. In his second letter Peter says that "we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received from God the Father honor and glory when such a voice came to him from the Excellent Glory: 'This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.' And we heard this voice which came from heaven when we were with him on the holy mountain. We also have the more sure prophetic word which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts."

Peter says that he is not teaching fables because he was an eyewitness to the life of Christ. He mentions the voice from Heaven attesting to Christ's deity. But then he goes on to say—please listen closely—he goes on to say that the Bible is the prophetic word made more sure—more sure than a voice from Heaven and being an eyewitness—which we ought to pay attention to, to study. How long should we study it? Until it dawns on us what the Bible means, or as Peter put it, using a similar figure of speech, "until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts." Why should we study the Bible like that? Surely there are other books that we can learn from, aren't there? Well, Peter says that the Bible

has a monopoly on truth: It is a light that shines in a dark place. Not a well-lit place, not even a poorly lit place, but a dark place.

The world is a dark place. The world vase, unlike the ancient Chinese vases, has both a top and a bottom. It seals out the light. Only Christ, who has broken into the world, is the light of the world; and we know Christ only as we know the Bible. It is the Bible alone that gives us knowledge, and every thought that is suggested to us by the media, by our friends, by the church, by the books we read, and even by our own minds, must be tested by Scripture. Paul says that "the weapons of our warfare are not carnal 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." We must bring our every thought into captivity to Christ. We must demolish arguments that exalt themselves against the knowledge of God. There is no neutral ground in this warfare. Every thought, every idea, every argument is to be conformed to what the Bible teaches, or it is to be destroyed.

Now Christian schools, including Interlaken Christian School from which you are now graduating, are based on an understanding of this intellectual struggle against the world. The world does not press on us with physical walls as a Chinese vase would. It does not cause a visible deformity in our bodies. It presses upon us intellectually. It causes us to think wrong thoughts, to believe false statements, and therefore to behave as sinners. And it presses upon us continually. Because of our innate sinfulness, we can never rid ourselves completely of error in this life. Paul lamented this fact in his letter to the Romans when he says, "I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind." Paul, like all Christians, was being renewed from the inside out; and the law of his mind was at war with the law of his members.

But though we can never be perfect in this life, we can, by the grace of God who works all things according to the counsel of his own will, make

some progress. We can, for example, beware lest anyone cheats us through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ. How can we prevent being cheated?

There are two ways, one better than the other, but both are useful. How does a bank avoid being cheated by counterfeiters? It trains its tellers to recognize genuine bills. They study the bills at length and in detail. They learn every little detail, every squiggle, every shading of color. Then when they are handed a counterfeit, they can recognize it immediately. The tellers know the fake bills because they first know the genuine bill so well.

So it is with ideas. The best defense, students—and we all ought to recognize that we are all students, for each of us is taught every day by others—the best defense we have against being fooled, against being cheated in the daily exchange of ideas, is to know the truth front wards, backwards, and inside out. This means more than memorizing Scripture. It means understanding what you have memorized, seeing how the parts fit together, understanding, for example, how justification depends upon election, how obedience depends upon knowledge. It means learning systematic theology. Every Christian must do this, as far as he is able; and I am convinced that most Christians are more able than they let on, and that all Christians can get wisdom from God, as James says, if only they would ask for it.

There is no excuse for failing to study the Bible. Read the greetings in the letters of the New Testament. To whom are the letters addressed? To the pastor? To the elders? To the deacons? *Romans* is addressed to "all who are in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints." It is the first systematic theology written by a Christian, and it is explicitly addressed to all Christians, not just to church leaders. They are not even mentioned. *First Corinthians* is addressed "to the church of God which is at Corinth, ... called to be saints, with all who in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord." Again no mention of church leaders. They are included by implication, of course, just as you are, for the letter is addressed to all in

everyplace who call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. No leaders are even mentioned in the greeting of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. Nor in *Galatians*. Nor in *Ephesians*. Nor in *Colossians*. Nor in *First and Second Thessalonians*. Nor in *First and Second Peter*. In all these letters all Christians are addressed. Church leaders are not even mentioned. Only in Paul's letter to the Philippians are church officers mentioned at all, and they are mentioned after Paul had addressed all the saints. So if you think that thinking and theology are not your cup of tea, think again. Every one of us has been commanded by God to study the Bible until we understand it.

Graduates, do not be persuaded to abandon a rigorous and thorough study of Scripture by the false ideas—which you hear from so many who seem so pious—that too much study gets in the way of your spiritual life, or that we must be practical rather than theoretical, or that the heart is more important than the head, or that the simple Gospel, not systematic theology, is all that is needed. Peter commands you to study until you understand. He says that everything you need for life and godliness comes through the knowledge of theology. God says that a man is justified through belief alone, not by what he does. If you go on to Christian colleges, you may hear chapel speakers warning you against study, theory, and systematic thinking. I went to two Christian colleges; I heard the chapel speakers say that too much study is bad for one's spiritual development. If study is that harmful, one wonders why the chapel speakers don't urge students to drop out entirely.

Unfortunately some do. They urge students to avoid studying philosophy. But the study of philosophy is the second way of recognizing counterfeits. When banks train tellers, they have them study genuine bills, but they also show them some counterfeits, so that the tellers can see the differences between the fakes and the real bills. The study of secular philosophy is very rewarding, if only for that reason. By seeing where Plato, Aristotle, and Marx made their mistakes, perhaps you can avoid the same mistakes and understand the Scripture better. Ironically, it is those who are not familiar with secular philosophy who are most influenced by it,

because they do not recognize secular ideas when they appear in the media, the churches, and in their own minds.

Now you graduates have two advantages over the rest of us. First, you have been given a solid, basic, Christian education. Few of your parents have had such a privilege. You will have to unlearn a lot less than many of us did after we had gone through school. Second, you are all going onto college where you will be able to devote most of your time to study. Take every advantage of this. Don't waste a second of your time in school on less important matters. Soon enough you will be out of school and facing the cares of this world just as your parents do now. Your parents already have other duties, and the cares of this world frequently distract them from studying the things of God.

But you graduates also have a significant disadvantage. As time has passed, the enemies of God have become more and more clever in their deceptive arguments, and more and more brazen in their attacks on the Bible. Christianity has been in almost continual decline since the seventeenth century, just as it was for a thousand years preceding the Reformation in the sixteenth century. One does not have to attend a secular university to hear non-Christian, sub-Christian, and even anti-Christian ideas being taught; they are being taught in many Christian colleges as well. Worst of all, they are being taught as Christian ideas. In the intellectual warfare with the world, many religious leaders and institutions have either surrendered or are pursuing detente. They prefer unity and peace to truth. They are growing to love the shape of the world vase. They dislike having constantly to resist the pressures put upon them by the world. They are doing the world's work, not Christ's.

So, graduates, you must begin to assume the responsibility of thinking for yourselves, of testing everything by the Word of God alone. Whenever anyone suggests an idea to you, ask, how do you know? If he suggests that the idea is Christian, ask for the chapters and verses that teach it. Examine everything by the microscope of Scripture. Accept nothing as true that is not explicitly taught in

Scripture or may not be deduced by good and necessary consequence from Scripture.

You are obligated to do as much as you can to advance God's truth; remember what happened to the fellow who buried his talent in the ground. If you have been given abilities by God—and you all have, or we would not be here today—you are obligated to use them completely. With talent goes responsibility and the possibility of greater reward. God has so arranged things that the power we exert under him varies with our mental ability. What the Church needs, and needs desperately, is a new generation of Christian intellectuals who—like the apostle Paul, Athanasius, Augustine, Martin Luther, and John Calvin—can demolish the arguments of the world and take captive every thought for Christ. A folksy, cracker-barrel Christianity is not enough. In understanding we must be men.

Graduates, as you leave Interlaken Christian School, you will face great opportunities and great challenges. You will have to examine every idea you are taught, not only for the next four years, but also for the rest of your life. This will not be easy; you will face ridicule and scorn, for the world regards nothing as more obscene than a person who believes the Bible to be true. But be as noble as the Jews at Berea who compared all they were taught with the Scriptures to see whether it was the truth.

If you also do so, then, at the end of your earthly life, you will be able to say with Paul, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give to me on that day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved his appearing" (2 *Timothy* 4:7-8).

Congratulations, graduates, on your splendid achievements. May God grant you the wisdom to continue as you have so well begun, and to receive, at the commencement of eternity, the reward that he has prepared for all those who love his appearing through the mercy of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.