

On Integral Discipleship

Commencement Address for Edinburgh Theological Seminary

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Congratulations graduates, to your families and friends, and to all fellow disciples supporting the magnificent bridge-work being accomplished here at the border of Texas and Mexico. I am honored to address you here at Edinburgh Theological Seminary.

Perhaps you should know that I too am a bridge-builder, although I did not see myself as one until I interviewed to be the chief officer of IAPCHE. Nearly two decades ago, I began to study politics, following what I thought to be God's call to teach political science in a Christian college in North America. A decade later I was without job or a PhD and completely confused regarding my calling. I wondered why God had seemingly abandoned me in the midst of Iowa's "corn desert." By God's grace I found myself called to build a community of trust among Christians in higher education around the world. My comments today arise from my experiences and reflections on that task.

You are now transitioning toward a new season of kingdom-service. In this new time of life, you will be seen more as an authority in your own right and less under the authority of others. The pastors that you are to be will have greater responsibilities than the students that you have been. I suspect that my comments today will add to both your anxiety and excitement.

I will likely heighten your anxiety in three ways. First, I warn you that those engaged in building bridges between peoples may end up estranged from both sides. Without careful attention to your starting points, you may suffer from a loss of identity. In a world with many false definitions of what it means to be human, you will wonder who you are. For example, if you attempt to build bridges in the area of politics, particularly at a time when the world is still heavily organized by states, you will be pulled between the labels "American" and "Mexican." As hostility increases across the border you will be caught in the middle of the bridge, no longer comfortable with either label.

Second, you will be tempted to escape the tension involved in building bridges. Some people avoid the tension of friends who are very different from each other by acting like a chameleon. In this context you might be tempted to celebrate Cinco de Mayo when in Mexico and Independence Day when in the U.S. Because this strategy only works as long as your two sets of friends remain estranged, this cannot be the strategy of bridge-builders like us. Another strategy to escape the bridge-building tension is to emphasize the sameness of people. This can be done by stripping away differences or adding what is lacking to the other. A world of McDonalds would have us forget about chorizo and salsa, and consume

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only Coca-cola, hamburger and ketchup. Instead of building a bridge between two high places, this approach proposes that we scrape the heights from each side and fill in the middle, ultimately creating a vast flat land. Such a world has no need for bridges, because everything—perhaps everyone—is the same.

Third, you will be called to travel. I know, it sounds like a tough job that somebody has to do — the hotels, airplanes, restaurants and exotic destinations. But remember this is not glamour travel, the likes of which you see in travel agency brochures. Building the bridges we seek requires a preliminary survey of strategic locations from which to build: you need to understand the cultural landscape on both sides of the border. This will often require that you travel through shadowed ravines where drugs, sex, and money flow. You will not only shine God's light in such frightening places, but you will build bridges between light-shiners. This kind of work cannot be accomplished from cool and comfortable heights but can only be done in the heat, on the ground and over time. It can be exhausting and you can become disoriented.

Such are some of the perils that confront bridge-builders. These perils are heightened because not only will you face them, but you will also encourage others to join the struggle. At this point I'm tempted to recall Woody Allen's advice to graduates: "today you face the choice between hopelessness and despair on the one side and utter destruction on the other." Fortunately, the options that confront a modern nihilist are not ours. We friends of Jesus Christ live in the already but not yet fully realized kingdom of Jesus. In this place we recognize sin and brokenness, but we reject evil, even when packaged as the lesser of two evils. Instead, we strive toward the good, even when the good is imperfect. There is no room for despair in this kind of life.

To assist you I offer some reminders. Those of you who are married understand the importance of *remembering*. As Dr. J. Dinakaral, one of IAPCHE's regional directors, recently noted, the way to make sure you always remember your anniversary (or your wife's birthday) is to forget it once.

The first reminder is that **we** are disciples. That is, our disciplined attempts to bear witness to the already but not yet completed reign of King Jesus can only be accomplished along with others similarly committed. Yes we recognize that there are times when Jesus comes to us individually. Jesus called many disciples individually, but he taught them as a group. Further he sent the disciples out in pairs, not alone. Our lives of service cannot be isolated from that of family, spouse, children, friends, or colleagues. Sometimes you can find them all in Church. Indeed, one of the great Fathers of the Church, Augustine of Hippo, and his friends signed much of their correspondence as *servei Dei*, servants of God.

Perhaps part of my story can illustrate this connection between the personal and corporate. I spoke earlier of a time of great confusion in my life. After failing to qualify for several positions at various Christian colleges, I wondered why the Lord had called me to higher education in the first place. Life looked like a desert to me, and I was angry with God for seemingly abandoning me. In despair I simply quit writing my dissertation. Eventually I stopped reading books and articles as well. During this whole

time, my wife **reminded** me that our Lord does not abandon his servants, and that I needed to finish the dissertation. Of course, she was not alone, but she led the charge that wore down my bitterness.

And so I came to make a kind of deal with God, not unlike that made by Gideon. I would polish my best chapter and submit it for publication; in effect I would put my fleece out on the threshing floor. Should that chapter be accepted, then I would take that as a sign of the Lord's desire for me to continue in higher education. Well, a couple months after I submitted my article I received a letter from the editor. I was greatly surprised to read a short letter of acceptance, requiring very few changes. The fleece was not merely dew-covered; it was soaked. And so I picked up the work and successfully defended my dissertation less than a year later. Shortly thereafter a member of a search committee requested that I apply for a position at his Christian college. Well, except for admitting to my wife that she was (again!) correct, all seemed right with the world. Until I didn't get that job either. I didn't even get the chance to interview. What I did get was irritated and cynical. Again wondering whether I was abandoned; I even went so far as to pick up a training manual so that I could learn how to drive a school bus.

In the midst of that that time, I received a call from Anne Maatman who noted that IAPCHE was looking for a new Executive Secretary and asked if I would be willing to meet with her and John Hulst about that possibility. Without much reflection, I agreed to meet with them a couple days later. But note that what I heard Anne ask was whether I'd be interested in working as a secretary to the executive, not an Executive Secretary. In my irritable state, I decided that if God wanted me to serve as a secretary and not as a bus driver, I'd file papers, type memos and make coffee.

At some point during our meeting I understood that the job of an Executive Secretary to the Board was much more than filing papers, typing memos and making coffee. At that moment I was stunned, almost as if someone had punched me in the nose. My face was numb, and tears welled up in my eyes.

The central point is that I couldn't have even made it to the interview process without the encouragement from my friends and family. They reminded me of my task and encouraged me in difficult times. Indeed, they pulled me from despair and reminded me of my identity as a disciple. So too you must keep strong your friendships with fellow bridge-builders. You must always recognize and honor the reality that is the body of Christ. Look about you here. Your fellow graduates, your friends, and your family provide the context in which you can complete your task—as you will provide that same context for them. This is especially important as you work across cultures, for you will have to remind our fellow disciples of their fundamental identity when they forget themselves.

Beyond the personal, you need to hear of what is going on worldwide in Christian higher education because it is nothing less than thrilling. In the last generation we have seen more Christian colleges started than at any previous time in history. Although the U.S. has the largest number of institutions (483), it has experienced relatively flat growth (8). Other regions have seen much more robust growth:

Oceania 71, 8

Latin America 135, 28

Europe and Russia 61, 19

Asia 254, 24

Africa 68, 42

Middle East 9, 1

This totals to 1081 Christian colleges and universities worldwide that build our mere Christianity into the practices of higher education. Outside of the United States, 20% of these institutions have been formed over the last 25 years. So, ETS has many friends around the world. Perhaps more importantly for ETS, you graduates are greatly needed, as the single greatest demand is not for money or other resources, but for Christian scholar/teachers who understand the central importance of a Christian worldview.

My second reminder highlights the central identity to which you will encourage others: **integral discipleship**. I use the term “integral discipleship” to describe a Christian life. I root this description in some of the most important texts in the Bible. In the Genesis account of God’s good creation we find all things integrally related to the source of their existence. In Mathew’s record of the Great Commission, Jesus acknowledged his authority over all creation. In his letter to the Colossians Paul says, “[Jesus] is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” Convinced by the full witness of scripture, integral disciples reject any dualism which isolates faith as private or irrelevant to their work. Instead, we celebrate all attempts to build bridges between the sin-shattered aspects of creation and the redeeming work of the Spirit. This indeed is the central importance of what we are doing today: celebration. And yet we will continue to pray as Jesus taught us all: “thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.”

We must continue to pray, and our lives must continue to serve as a kind of prayer, because there are great forces lined up against our project. Perhaps the most powerful non Christian worldview in the Americas denies the integral nature of Creation. For centuries Christians have been told that religion is not rational; it is private; it destroys human community. Instead, we should seek a *value neutral* approach to life. “Secularism,” we have been told, is the only reasonable and peaceful public approach to human community.

We integral disciples know that this project is impossible. Indeed you can find an area of life apart from God as easily as you can jump over your own shadow. The only way we can avoid this feature of creation is by turning out the lights, boarding the windows and hoping that we can adjust to living in darkness. Over time, we may even forget that shadows exist.

But people do not flourish in darkness. Indeed, we might note that people don’t live for long in darkness. Sooner or later people will light their own candles. And so it has gone for the last centuries, with ever elaborate and dangerous attempts to create a light that replaces the sun. The intellectual engineers have held up various neutral sciences (of history, economics, psychology, physics, mathematics, and so on) and declared that they have finally found THE TRUTH. Over the last century we have endured the progression of increasingly brutal truths, with the emphasis on brutal, not on truth.

Recently, Richard Dawkins has joined the argument. You may recall that in books like *The God Delusion*, Dawkins has claimed that science, particularly biology and chemistry, when purged of religion, provides access to the truth that is evolution. However, when asked in a recent interview where human beings

came from opined that the most likely source was space aliens. In the presence of such claims one is tempted to breathe carefully so as to avoid blowing out the feeble candlelight.

But don't give in to this temptation! Remember that the whole world belongs to God. Remember that we are *servei Dei* of God himself. Thus instead of silence, I encourage you to sing loudly:

“This is my Father’s world
And to my listening ears
All nature sings
And round me rings
The music of the spheres.”

If you are not particularly musical you can shout out a great phrase of resistance from C.S. Lewis: “Every square inch and every split second is claimed by God and counter claimed by Satan.”

Bridge builders like us work the ground. Divided ground? We know that. Broken ground? We know that. Contested ground? We know that. Neutral ground? That we do not know, except as a fiction to tempt us away from the task of building our bridge to God’s kingdom. So then let us celebrate the graduation here at ETS for here are those who are building bridges to God’s holy ground. Hallelujah. Amen.