

President __, members of the board, faculty, honored graduates, parents, students and friends of __. As you can easily imagine, it is with great personal pleasure that I come to this occasion even though a commencement address is probably the most difficult assignment that can be given a man. All--faculty, grads, friends--all have an idea as to what such an address should be like, and each idea is different. I'm supposed to preach and be scholarly, quote and not bore, be contemporary yet timeless, aim at the graduates yet not ignore everybody else. There is only one thing about which there is agreement concerning a commencement address, and that is it must be short. I sometimes wonder if Michael the archangel could satisfy all the demands of an occasion like this. But where angels fear to tread here I am running in.

I want to speak to you today concerning some mirages which have appeared on the scene of contemporary Xianity and which will lure you as you walk down the road of your life and ministry. Like all ^{Mirages - these are optical illusions +} ~~mirages~~ these are particularly attractive when viewed against the background of monotonous surroundings. Too, like all mirages, they can be ^{photographed - pros} photographed, and we are being heavily propaganized as to the reality and validity of these contemporary mirages.

What are some of these mirages? The first I wish to speak of might be labeled the mirage of new structures, and it has several forms. We are being told that the old forms and structures must be pulled

down--they have outlived their usefulness, and in their place we need new forms which, interestingly, would be better if they were unstructured. This restructuring, it is said, must be done in at least three vital areas: we must restructure our presentation of the gospel, we must redesign the church, and we must do something about realigning middle class American Xians. These ideas are being promoted by some clever catchword or cliché so that we are being talked into the reality of the mirage. Do you know what causes a mirage? I wouldn't dare say this on my own so this seems to be an appropriate time to introduce one of those scholarly quotes so necessary to a commencement address. The encyclopedia says: "all mirages are formed by hot air near the surface of the earth." The catchword for restructuring our presentation of the gospel is dialog. Now dialog is a very fine word to express the idea of a conversation between two persons. Would to God there were more dialog between redeemed and unredeemed people. But one has some misgivings concerning the content and intent of dialog as it is often practiced and promoted today. The intent seems to be to explore each other's viewpoint in order to discover areas of mutual agreement and interest, and in the process impress each other with one's knowledge, scholarship and broadmindedness. The content of such intent often omits a straightforward statement of the gospel which is after all the only message which can really help the unredeemed person engaged in dialog.

Sometimes in dialog, the gospel is reworded in order to make it seem to communicate more meaningfully to the 20th century mentality. Usually dialog is conducted according to an unwritten but definite code of theological protocol. Now I am not attacking the expression of the gospel in language that is meaningful to people. Nor am I casting aspersions on a genuine concern for people, but I am alarmed at the trend toward being polite to error which relegates the gospel to the category of another human opinion. It is not fashionable today to be dogmatic about anything--even a message which claims to be absolute truth from God about forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Paul reminds us, "Though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed." This strong warning says that the content of the gospel is not subject to revision, and that it is not determined by the pressures of current consensus. Toleration, which is foreign to Paul's words, is too often the essence of dialog. We are not seeking ultimate truth; we have it. The "what" of the gospel determines the "how" of evangelism, and there is no place for compromise or cowardice.

"Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved" is still God's message to 20th century man, and it is a message to be preached, proclaimed, witnessed to. "Christ sent me to preach the gospel" has an authoritative ring about it which doesn't come through if you say, "Christ sent me to dialog the gospel" or "to workshop the gospel" or

"to seminar" the gospel.]

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And yet, in spite of what I've said, I am for dialog as long as it is conducted in the manner in which the Lord Jesus conducted his most famous dialog with an unregenerated individual. That dialog was, of course, with Nicodemus, an intellectual and religious leader of his day. But you will remember that our Lord did not seek to explore areas of mutual agreement in their Judaic heritage; nor did He dwell on their common professional status as rabbis; nor did He ask for Nicodemus' critical appraisal of the viewpoint presented to him. The Lord patiently, persistently and pointedly kept facing this lost man with "Ye must be born again." That's dialog at its finest. There may be various ways to do this, but if the intent of dialog is to represent self, not Christ, and if the content is lowest common denominator or mutual agreement, and not the gospel, the result can only be a mirage generated by the hot air of the participants.

Another area of restructuring we are being told today must center in the church. At a recent Xian leadership conference this slogan was frequently heard: "Flee the church to where the action is!" "The Church is finished" goes another cliché--or more boldly, "God is through with the church." None of these statements is true. But because they are presumed to be true, we are being told to give our money, efforts and time to other Xian works which are supposed to be doing a better job for the Lord. I in no way condone the incrustations

of churchianity, but neither can we afford to throw the baby out with the bath. ^{Neither will I deny the work that the Lord which many of the Ch. organizations are doing} The church, and I speak of the local assembly of professing believers in X, is a God-ordained institution. But, it is said, the church is failing to get the job done while the specialized organization is markedly successful. And just how successful do you think that specialized ministry would be if, like the church, it were obliged to take into its ranks all who profess to believe? It is often successful simply because it can be exclusive and choose with whom it will associate and with whom it will work. "But we're an arm of the church." And just how many arms can a body have? And do the arms coordinate and direct the body or vice versa? Not many could qualify as an arm of the church by that simple test.

But the church has failed, you insist. And I agree in part. But even though this is true, the remedy is not to abandon or demean the church but rather to get in there and pitch and make it the organization it ought to be. If the church has failed it is because the members have failed, and they are you and I. Every indictment of the church is an indictment of you and me.

May I remind you of a few unalterable truths about the church? The risen and ascended Lord walks in the midst of local churches, directing, correcting, exhorting but never disowning them (Rev. 1-3). It is the church which is the center of the exercise of spiritual gifts for the building up of the saints (1 Cor. 12). The church

when it comes together observes the ordinances which her head gave (6) to her (1 Cor. 11). The church is responsible for the relief of its poor at home and in other places (Acts 11, 1 Tim 5). Into its services the unsaved shall come to hear the message of God (1 Cor. 14:23-24). It exercises discipline over its members (1 Cor. 5); recognized leaders are expected to rule as well as shepherd the flock (Heb 13). It is the home base for sending out missionaries, and the object of missionary work is the establishing of local churches (Acts 13-14). In view of these Scriptural truths the importance of the local church can scarcely be overestimated. I beseech you graduates, do not neglect God's church in your own personal relationship to it and support of it and in connection with any other aspect of Xian work into which you may be led.

A third area which we are being told needs restructuring is a group of people--middle class American Xians. Now middle class Xians do have their faults--some are carnal, many are complacent, most are worldly, and ^{at present} worst of all, they live in suburbia. I'm not a sociologist nor do I offer a way to restructure society for the better. I do know that in X, class is neither that which commends nor condemns in the sight of God. Faithfulness to the Lord in one's occupation, in one's social class, with one's possessions is what He requires. I know too that the Bible expects all to work and all to give and not to be impressed with wealth either in one's self or in the church.

Selfishness is a matter of the heart, not of what one has or has not. You can be selfish with little or much, and it's wrong in either case. (7)

Now middle class American Xians are taking quite a beating these days. They seem to be responsible for the failure of the church, the failure of missions, the riots in our cities and anything else that needs a scapegoat. I noticed with interest that only two weeks ago an internationally known liberal theologian said that middle class people "are fed up with the general disposition of the church to scold them rather than to minister to them. . . they are getting tired of serving as golden goose and whipping boy at one and the same time." Now I do not condone sins or carnality in any class, lower, middle, or upper, but I would like to point out a fallacy in our thinking about the middle class. Many of you have heard enough missionaries speak to know that anyone who labors in a country where there are only a few very rich and masses of very poor longs for the day when the emerging middle class will become a real force in the society and economy. Why? Simply because a stable self-supporting and growing national church cannot be built on a few rich and many poor. There must be a middle class. Yet here at home we are acting as if the middle class should be done away with in the interest of furthering Xianity. I want to say a word in defense of these people. It's the middle class who in large measure support the Lord's work and the

Lord's workers. Most missionaries, most churches, most Xian organizations are supported by the many regular though small gifts that come from middle class American believers. Thank God for the middle class who get up and go to work day after day, who regularly support the services of the local church and who faithfully give of their income to His work and who, not so incidentally, financed part of your education here. Beware before you pull down that structure for a mirage that won't support anything.

The fourth mirage of which I wish to speak is the mirage of unrestricted Xian liberty; that is, the mistaken idea that a believer can enjoy a life of liberty without experiencing any restrictions in his living. The catchword is a Frankenstein word--legalism, for to have any kind of law, we are being told is to be legalistic.

Let us think straight about this for a moment. The word legalist, of course, is not a Scriptural word, so it can pretty well mean whatever the person using it wants it to mean. Usually it is defined to justify the practice of the one defining it and to condemn the conduct of all others. Let's clarify a few things so that we won't be deluded by this mirage.

First, legalism is not the presence of law; if it were then God would have to be charged with promoting legalism since He has given a lot of laws. Furthermore, parents, church leaders and governmental authorities would also be guilty of legalism since they are expected

to legislate in their respective areas. Legalism is not the presence of laws.

Second, legalism is not the imposition of law on someone else. If it were, then how could you explain the biblical sanction for parents and church rulers imposing laws upon their families and churches?

Third, the Xian believer is responsible to a specific ethical code of conduct revealed in the New Testament. That code includes positive and negative commands which are not subject to situational interpretation; it also sets forth principles for conduct like "do all to the glory of God"; and it provides for legislation of laws in certain areas. It is a specific and detailed code of conduct.

Fourth, legalism is a wrong, self-exalting, attitude toward obeying the laws of the code under which one lives. It is very important to note that a legalist keeps the law; he is not a violator; a libertine is that. Not to obey the laws is lawlessness, not liberty. Obeying to the glory of God is right; obeying to exalt self is legalism. But both the legalist and the non-legalist will give outward conformity to the laws under which they are living.

Fifth, living in Xian liberty is living a life of restrictions. Slavery is the biblical opposite of liberty, and it is the new position we have as believers in X which frees us from the bondage of slavery of sin and the flesh. This position also gives us the

possibility of being slaves of righteousness. Xian liberty does NOT give the believer the option of living any way he pleases; it is not license. It is not unrestricted living.

The great restriction of Xian liberty is love. Paul put it succinctly: "For, brethren, ye have been called into liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another" (Gal. 5:13). Love is seeking the best in the object loved, and since the best is the will of God, love is seeking the will of God. Serving one another by doing the will of God personally and by seeking to see it done in others is the life of true Xian liberty. And this is true Xlikeness, for He whose freedom was unlimited voluntarily took on Himself the restrictions of the form of a servant. His liberty was limited by His great love for us; so then "we that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let every one of us please his neighbor for his good to edification. For even Christ pleased not Himself" (Rom. 15:1-3)

A fifth and final mirage is the mirage which I shall call the mirage of Instamatic Maturity and Power.

No one will deny that we live in an Instamatic society. Scientific advances have made this true. Travel is comparatively instantaneous when you can board an airliner and, according to the clock, arrive at your destination before you left. Miles can be bridged in seconds via the telephone. Or perhaps you enjoyed this very morning a powder

that you mixed with water and drank for your Instant Breakfast. (11)

Our affluence has made us Instamatic conscious. I can afford to wash my car in 3 minutes. My instant credit consolidates my liabilities (though it does not rid me of them). And who doesn't want a photograph all finished in 10 or 60 seconds--especially if it's a graduation picture.

The increasing youthfulness of our population has become a major force in making us all conscious of the immediate. "We want to right the wrongs of society, and we want to do it Now," youth declares. "We want peace, power, freedom, justice. . .all now."

Science, affluence, youth are not villains, and the instamatic society they have created is not all bad. But there is one questionable result of it, and that is impatience or frustration with anything that is not instamatic. Everything must be accomplished right now, or else it is intolerable. But the cruel facts of life are simply that many things take time.

And one of those things is spiritual maturity and power. But the mirage--and you can see it clearly now, can't you--is that there can be instamatic spiritual power. Many sermons seek to be instamatic with titles "7 secrets to this" or "5 steps to that" or "3 keys to something else." You heard about the man who prayed, "Lord give me patience, and give it to me right now!" But perhaps you didn't hear about the student who tried to speed read his time of devotions. This

is the mirage of instamatic spirituality.

Politicking, public relations, methods, and boasting in size are further shortcuts we take to apparent spiritual power. Politicking and maneuvering can never substitute for fellowship and the leading of the Lord; the finest public relations firm can never replace prayer, pep is not power, and size--what shall I say of size? The cliché goes like this: "Of course numbers aren't everything, but we are the 2nd, 3rd, 1st largest something somewhere." The Scriptures dispel the mirage, for they remind us that God still delights to take the foolish things of this world to confound the wise, and the weak things to confound the things that are mighty, and He does it for a very special reason--that no flesh should glory in His presence. My impression is that in general evangelicals are well up on the newest methods, use the best public relations (and this is as it should be), but still play politics, glory in size and influence, and fail utterly to pray. You graduates have undoubtedly learned good habits of prayer and Xian growth here; do not lose them next week, or next year. Later, many of you will be connected with various phases of the Lord's work in leadership capacities--as Xian workers, board members, lay leaders. Lead with power, not the "brown and serve" kind, nor the "just add water and stir" variety, but with genuine power that comes from long and close fellowship with your Lord.

The goal of spiritual power and maturity is no mirage, only how (13) quickly it can be attained. Listen again to the Word of God: "we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit" (2 Cor. 3:18). Or again, "Solid food is for the mature, for those who have their faculties trained by practice to distinguish good and evil (Heb. 5:14). Does that sound like Instamatic maturity? Polaroid Power that develops in 10 seconds is the mirage: spiritual blood, sweat and tears over a long time is the reality.

I would be naive if I didn't realize that some might write off what I have said as so negative as to be ~~or~~ completely irrelevant. Perhaps our concept of relevance is wrong. Our contemporary idea is that the Bible must be made relevant to today's world. Exactly the opposite is the case--we must seek to make ourselves and our society relevant to the unchanging standards of the Bible. As on Xian statesman has said: "Far from catering to our changing whims, the relevance of the Bible is precisely its unwavering and disturbing demands on our life. It is relevant by showing us how our life is shamelessly irrelevant to it." By that criterion what I have said is very relevant. But lest you be put off by any tinge of negativism, may I summarize positively what I have said: Mirages will vanish; therefore, give yourselves to proclaiming the gospel, supporting your church, being a

vibrant and zealous Xian in whatever class of society you live, exercising your Xian liberty by being a slave to righteousness, and growing into a mature and powerful child of God.

And now I am finished. But, you may say, you've said nothing new. I'm glad you recognize that, for then you will also doubtless recall where you heard it before. Just because it is in God's Word and so basic to your life I thought it worthwhile to say it again. God bless you and keep you faithful to the Lord and to His Word.