

President Benton, honored board, faculty, graduates, parents, friends of Grace Bible Institute. I am delighted to be here today for a ~~number~~^{several} of reasons. For one, I think so very highly of this school--its president, its faculty and the graduates you have sent us for further training. I appreciate what you stand for and what you are doing for the Lord's work. For another, I am glad to have an opportunity to give a commencement address tho I realize that it is probably the most difficult assignment a person can have. All--faculty, grads, friends--all have an idea as to what a commencement 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 grads yet not ignore anyone else. I think 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.

Yet I welcome the opportunity, for it gives me a chance to unburden myself about a topic and in a way that would not be so appropriate in a sermon. What I want to say today is simply this: For all of us, and particularly I speak to the graduates, and ~~for all of our lives~~, the authority of the written living Word, the Bible, and the experience of the living, incarnate Word, ^{Jesus} Christ, are equally important.

I repeat: Now, the church and individual Christians have always lived under the Period of the Pendulum, that is, swinging from one extreme to another. ^{The Theologian,} G.C. Berkouwer states, "reaction is a phenomenon in Christian thought that has played a large role in the history of the church in its theology. ... Observing that a given aspect of faith was neglected, Christians have often proceeded to accentuate that aspect. . . with a resulting neglect of other aspects." This generation is ~~no~~^{not} ~~exception~~^{exempt}. The church has always faced the tension between doctrine that doesn't produce vital experience and experience that doesn't grow out of sound doctrine, but today it seems as if the polarization is more ~~serious~~^{serious} and dangerous. The pendulum has swung alarmingly toward experience which has not grown out of sound doctrine. Existential theology is king; existential living is "in"; what matters to this generation is not doctrine but experience.

In this attitude the church has taken on the thought patterns of the world, as usual. In the March 13, 1972 Time essay, Melvin Maddocks proclaims our society as "the new cult of madness" wherein thinking is treated as a bad habit. "We have become the first people," claims Maddocks, "to proclaim their age the age of unreason. 'Reason' and 'logic' have, in fact, become dirty words--death words. They have been replaced by the life words 'feeling' and 'impulse.' Consciousness--the rational--is presumed to be shallow, and unconsciousness--the irrational--to be always interesting, often profound and usually true."

This same mindset is being urged on the Christian public as well. In his book Like a Mighty ^{and Tori} responds to the question, "CAN the Indonesian revival be reduplicated in America?" by saying Yes, if we will "take out that small computer which is your brain and put it in a little box and shoot it to the moon, then let God use your heart."

King Experience is on the throne in the religious world today. Just how is he extending his reign? I want to suggest 3 ways.

First, he is using our testimonies to give the impression that experiences create truth rather than attest to truth. "I experienced it", we hear on every hand, "so it must be right." "Look at the change my experience has brought--it has to be valid."

"I can't deny my own experience so I know it's true." Or do I dare remind you of the familiar words of a favorite hymn (this will shake you, I'm afraid), I serve a risen Savior, He's in ^{the world} my heart today. I know that he is living whatever men may say. How do I know? ^{NOT by empty words, but by the witness of the Spirit} He walks with me, He talks with me, along life's narrow way. ^{You ask me how I know He lives, in my heart} Granted, there is the witness of the Spirit in my heart and Jesus does walk and talk with me, but these experiences do not make the resurrection true. He is alive whether or not I ever experience this great truth. Testimonies can confirm the truth but they do not create truth. Also testimonies can deceive, for one can have a valid and real

experience which is not a Scriptural experience, and then use the testimony of it to imply or openly state that it must be desirable, even Scriptural, for all to have it. The only valid test of all experience is simply, Is it Scriptural? And the only way to apply this test ^{accurately} helpfully is to study the Scriptures and know what experiences please God. A testimony to be valid must be a testimony of the truth which God has already revealed in His written Word. But King Experience would have us put our faith in him who is experience rather than in Him who is truth. "It isn't logic, but an experience, that lets us know who Christ is" said one popular writer. But that simply is not true. If that were so, then Isaiah should have written, "Come now let us experience or feel together" rather than Come now let us reason together.

Another way that King Experience is extending his kingdom today is through current theology. Bernard Ramm has pinpointed this trend in an article entitled "Is it Safe to Shift to 'Interpersonal Theology'?" "In my own lifetime," he writes, "I am seeing a new, major movement emerging in evangelical theology. . . I see this new theology as a movement away from our traditional transactional theology to interpersonal theology..." By transactional theology he means the emphasis in preaching and teaching on God's great transactions for man and in man (e.g. the cross, res., Pentecost, justification, sanctification). By interpersonal theology he means preaching and teaching which places the emphasis on persons and the quality of their relationship in the family, church, community and work. Interpersonal theology stresses the necessity for Christians to understand how they tick psychologically and to learn to live within the interpersonal relationships of his family, church, work, community etc. Of course, the Bible does teach this emphasis, but when it becomes all encompassing, then the pendulum has swung too far. Donald Miller in his book The Authority of the Bible reminds us that experience cannot be the authority since "its subjectivity is too self-centered and introspective to be spiritually healthy. If Xn exp is to be the final court of appeal in matters of faith, then the force of religious attention must be within rather than without. The search for security and certainty becomes introspective and psychological. The understanding of the faith becomes self understanding. Theology becomes anthropology. Revelation becomes self-discovery. The search for salvation becomes the effort to "know thyself." And, if I may add, sanctification becomes a game of psychological strip-tease in small group encounters. We must never lose or submerge in our experiences the great truths of transactional theology on which all valid experience has to be built.

A third way that King Experience is extending his domain is in the area of communicating the gospel, yes ⁱⁿ communicating the gospel. Dialog is the ^{sharing my experience is the way to do it} "in" ^{with} word today. Now dialog is a legitimate means of communication, but as it is often practiced today it means ^{sharing &} exploring different viewpoints in order to discover areas of mutual agreement and heal divisions that the dogmatists have caused. We Christians are not seeking ultimate truth. We have it. Gal. 1 is not a picture of tolerance and truth-seeking. Christ sent me to preach the Gospel has an authoritative ring about it that Christ sent me to dialog, workshop or seminar the gospel does not have. Or as Robert Brinsmead has said about the apostles: "These men did not turn the world upside down by telling people ABOUT their exciting experiences. . . They had something infinitely bigger and more weighty about which to preach. . . (The gospel) is the proclamation of an historic objective reality. It is not about our experience but about Christ's experience. This was the central affirmation of the apostles." When Jesus met Nicodemus we have "dialog" at its best. He did not speak of their mutual agreement in the Judaic heritage. He did not exploit the common bond they had as rabbis. Jesus did not even ask for Nicodemus' appraisal of his viewpoint. Jesus said, Ye must be born again. Even a contemporary religious sociologist said (in Time, Oct 11, 1971) that relevance is a dead issue and that what is now needed is "the stance of authority. Ages of faith are not marked by dialogue, but by proclamation." The Bible says, preach, herald, proclaim the gospel. Never depart from that throughout all your life.

May you graduates especially and all of us never fail to give the authoritative written living word of God its full and proper place in our testimonies, in our theology and in our proclamation of the Gospel.

Now, lest I seem guilty of pushing the pendulum too far in the direction of objective authority, I remind you of my point today. The authority of the Bible and the experience of the living Lord are equally important. The Christian life begins with the experience of conversion, and it continues in an ever widening circle of experiences with the living Lord. I want to focus on three areas of experience which are so vital to a maturing Christian life. The first is prayer. Prayer is one of the greatest of all existential experiences available to the believer. And it is one of the most important. Undoubtedly here at Grace you have learned some good habits of prayer. Don't forget them next week, month, or year. Pray at regular times, pray at irregular times, pray outside the church, pray in the church fellowship. Pray with a list, pray without one; pray alone, pray with others. But pray, and in all your praying pray intelligently. In prayer there is a beautiful wedding of the objective and the subjective, for we are told that God will hear and answer if we abide in Him and His words abide in us. Abiding in Him means keeping the objective commandments of the NT so that we are walking in fellowship with Him. His words cannot abide in us unless we know what they are through study of the Bible. When we do abide and when we do know His will, then the experience of prayer will be satisfying to us and glorifying to God.

A second area in which experience with the living Lord is so vital is in the area of leading or planning or strategy. The leading of the Lord is simply knowing His will through walking in fellowship with Him as guided and guarded by His revealed Word. And again the objective and subjective are wedded. A recent consultation on missions recommended 9 things concerning strategy for missions. Only 1 had anything to do with the Bible. The other 8 concerning hiring strategists, statisticians, etc. It recommended concentrating on responsive groups, having studied and measured scientifically why and where these groups are. Computerized leading can replace Spirit-direction. The computer would have told Paul to stay in Asia where people were responding to the gospel rather than going to Europe. The lights would have flashed and the machine jammed if the results of the work at Philippi had been fed in. Lack of responsiveness at Corinth would have said Move on. The Lord said, Stay on. There is no substitute for intimate enough fellowship with the Lord so that you know what He is saying clearly and directly ~~about~~ to you. Some will need this kind of leading for missionary work, or other kinds of Christian service. ~~Many~~ ^{All} of you will need it in the so called ordinary affairs of life. Some will serve on church boards. Do not assume that the practices of the world will suit the church. Neither should we assume that Christians who are leaders in secular activities are necessarily the best leaders for the church. I do not want to leave the impression that this is some mystical, mysterious thing which some ~~special~~ ^{super} saints have. Most leading of the Lord is through using ordinary common sense that has been immersed in the Word of God. To know that the ordinary as well as the extraordinary is lead of the Lord is the experience I covet for you.

The third area of experience of which I speak is the area of the yielded life. Here is the sine qua non of all Christian experience. Without this, prayer is self-centered; without this, leading is rationalization and self-justification. Without this, our works are of wood, hay and stubble. This is, I dare to say, even more important than knowing your spiritual gifts! That may sound like heresy, but it's true. I can remember the day, not too long ago, when a message on spiritual gifts seemed to be to people like a new revelation from God Himself, and in those days ~~exactly~~ it never entered my head that I would say some day that there is too much emphasis on gifts. But today there is, and too many are forgetting that more important than spiritual gifts is the doctrine of dedication. If you do not know your gifts but ^{truly} you are yielded, you don't need to worry. God will use ~~xxx~~ your gifts even tho you may never know what they are. But if you know your gifts and are not yielded, then you are in serious trouble. The great passage on gifts in Rom 12 is preceded by verses 1 and 2. The great passage on gifts in Eph 4 begins with a call to walk worthy. The great passage on gifts in

1 Cor 12 is preceded by several reminders to the Corinthians of their need to recognize that their bodies were the temples of the H.S. Spiritual maturity and spiritual usefulness is no Instamatic affair, but a day by day life of fellowship with the living Lord. You won't develop into a grown up Christian in 60 seconds.

May I summarize and then I'll ^{be finished} ~~quit~~. If you want Christ to have first place as your class motto says, then you must individually give equal place to the authority of the written living Word, the Bible, and ~~the~~ to the vital experiences of fellowship with the living incarnate Word, Jesus Christ. You do not really know anything about Jesus Christ except through the Bible, although you can know the Bible thoroughly without knowing anything about JC. But someone may still be protesting, I can't have a vital experience with a book, a thing, a piece of paper. Says who? Give me a check for \$1000 and I'll ~~show you~~ give you a live demonstration of a great existential experience right here and now. But, of course, after I've looked at all the facts on that check, date, bank, signature, I'll want to jump off this platform and run to you and have another equally vital existential experience person-to-person. The check is no good without the donor behind it, and the donor would ~~never~~ have no relationship to me without the check. May you know ^{a ~~from~~ experience} the authority of the Bible in your experiences, in your theology, in your witness, and may you experience & know all that the Lord has for each of you in prayer, in leading and in the yielded life all the days of your life.