

President _____, board, faculty, honored graduates, parents, and friends of _____. First, let me congratulate the grads on finishing today. The world and our lives are littered with unfinished projects, but you have completed your course of study, and for this you are to be commended. Let me also thank you for inviting me to give this commencement address, tho I realize it is prob the most difficult assignment a person can have. All, faculty, grads, friends--all have an idea what a comm. add. ought to be, and everyone's idea is different. I'm supposed to preach, yet be scholarly, quote others but not bore, be contemporary yet timeless, aim at the grads but not ignore others. I think there is only one thing about which there is agreement concn a comm add, 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!

Now I have lived a long time, not so long as Methuselah nor as his contemporary, but almost. So I have a perspective that longevity gives, and I want to use that perspective to highlight some trends I have observed at least from my student days and throughout the years of my active ministry. I will draw some ramifications from these trends and hope that they will alert you to be on guard through the years that may be given to you. First a few caveats. Trends are like clothes--some go out of style and are never seen again; others go out and come back. Trends like the God is Dead theology, process theology, linguistic analysis have all but disappeared. Secular humanism rears its head now and again. Barthianism's influence is still around tho not

so popular as it used to be. Too, I want to say up front that I cannot prove conclusively that a given trend is the cause of which another trend is the effect. However, the sequence and juxtaposition of trends should not be ignored. Churchill once said: "those who do not study history are doomed to repeat it."

The first trend is this--the shift away from our future hope to our present comfort. An interest in prophecy has waned in these past 60 or more years. In my seminary days the church I attended had an annual prophecy conference which I eagerly looked forward to and learned a lot from, for some of the best speakers in the country were involved. Even when I began my ministry, a number of churches regularly held prophecy conferences to which I was often invited, tho they began to diminish and die out a decade or two ago. [Off and on] ^{Today an upsurge of} some good books, didactic and fictional, appear, ^{it remains to be seen} but these did not always have much staying power. Further indication of this lessening of interest in prophecy is seen in our Christian magazines. In 1935 the old Revelation magazine had 25 major articles on prophecy. In 1975 its successor, Eternity magazine had only one throughout the year, and it warned against focusing too much attention on the second coming. When Christianity Today began it was unashamedly premillennial and mostly pretribulational, but that emphasis has shifted to a more inclusive and even sometime an anti-premillennial stance. In a relatively recent issue those of us who hold to an imminent rapture were labeled a sect. Even some of our best known and well respected evangelists preach less and less on prophecy than when

they first began their ministries.

What has filled the vacuum left by the diminution of interest in the future? A focus on this present life and a desire to make it as comfortable as possible. This seems to relate to several emphases in contemporary life. First, to the family. As the hope of the second coming became less important, Christians have focused their attention on the security and comfort offered by the family. Even the church was ^{is somewhat} subordinated to the family. Notice then changes made by Moody Monthly in its subtitle. Before 1960 it was "The Christian Service Magazine." In 1960 it was changed to "The Christian Magazine for All the family," and in 1975 it became "The Christian Family Magazine." In a typical year that magazine ran two dozen stories related to the family. Seminars, conferences, books organizations that focused on the family multiplied. This shift brought with it the need to provide more and more creature comforts for the security and serenity of the family. Remember: the first credit card was the Diners Club card in 1950. At first, it was only a promise to pay, but soon a credit line was added. Today Visa and Master Card are worldwide and the debt individuals owe is staggering. Observe another statistic: in 1949 only 13% of all mothers worked outside the home, in 1992, 60% did. Why? In many cases to have more income to satisfy our ever expanding list of "needs" of individuals and of the family. Perhaps a unbelievable result of a poll released in November 1996 revealed that among Americans who were asked what makes Christmas important to them, only 1/3rd said the birth of Jesus and 44% said family time. Among those who identified

themselves as Christians only 37% said that the birth of Jesus was the most important aspect of Christmas day for them. If the celebration of our Lord's first coming has become so relatively unimportant, how ^{can we expect} does His second coming ^{to} rate?

Second, this lessening of concern about the future and increasing concern about the present led to a sort of ecumenical and mutual acceptability by those in the wider communities to which we relate. Christian families were not necessarily exempt from the same problems as their unsaved neighbors, so there was a banding together of diverse religious and sociological backgrounds to try to face together the problems. Sociology tended to submerge theology, and a united front against societal ills made strange bedfellows. The enemy of my enemy became my friend. This alliance has come to the fore as never before in the 80s and 90s in relation to causes like abortion, prayer in the public schools, and general moral decay in society. The opposition to these has resulted in some strange pronouncements and alliances. The Moral Majority made no attempt to confine its membership to Christians only. In the recent elections the Christian Right showed itself as a force to be reckoned with. An article by a senior editor of CT in May 1995 praised the "beauties" in other religions. From Buddhists," the author wrote," I learned to be more sensitive to suffering. From Confucianists I learned to pay attention to my roots. With animists I have been that the supernatural permeated every area of life. Muslims have awed me by their reverence for God, their prayer-surrounded life, and their focus on ethics. It was

the Muslim who spoke up in support of prayer in schools. We need not fear these other religions. They are parts of cultural heritages that are gifts of God." The truth is that they are deceptions of Satan who transforms himself into an angel of light even in the offices of CT. Perhaps the document Evangelicals and Catholics Together in 1994 was a kind of climax to this togetherness. Among the 39 singers were Cardinal O'Connor, Father Neuhaus, Colson, Bright, Packer, etc. Colson, as quoted in the NY Times said "We have differences. Nevertheless on the ancient creeds and the core beliefs of Christianity we stand together." Not so, certainly not on the core beliefs concerning the Scriptures and justification by faith alone. Now, it is often quite right to cooperate with those who differ theologically in standing for morality, but when the basis of cooperation in societal concerns seeks to be built on a common theological base, on "core beliefs," it can so easily become deceptive and detracting from the importance of all the doctrines of the Bible, including eschatology.

Another trend I have observed has been the rise of popular psychology. I differentiate between therapeutic or clinical psychology which is concerned with relieving mental illness and popular psychology which attempts to promote happiness, a pleasing personality, self-esteem, self-improvement, self-realization, and self-actualization. In the period from 1925-1950 evangelicals were hostile ^{to} almost all psychology. In the 1950s a less belligerent attitude emerged. Yet in 1955 Vernon Grounds wrote that the faith was "being attacked vehemently and

particularly from the standpoint of psychology.” In the 60s^b and 70s evangelicals more and more embraced pop psychology, Clyde Narramore being one of the leading popularizers. And the interest continues to this day. People who formerly turned to their pastors for help have turned to the psychologist, both the professional ones and the popular ones. Pastors could be trusted to deal only with “little problems.” Evangelicals borrowed terms and concepts from secularists with little or no evaluation or discernment, and redefined biblical concepts (like heart and image of God) in psychological terms. Counseling and caring for people, one writer in CT said, “is but a modern expression of the Great Commission.” I seriously doubt that teaching baptized people psychological principles is the way to obey our Lord’s command to teach them the things He commanded. Indeed, one pop psychologist warned against praying or quoting Scripture during counseling sessions. Seminars, ^{Temporary bridges, How to Build a Mountain, Happiness is a Choice.} articles and books abound. In a single year 87% of the books published related to self and personal problems. A few years ago I wrote a book titled *Transformed by His Glory*. I went into a Christian bookstore and found it shelved with Self-help books. Perhaps that wasn’t too bad, for it may have sold better under that category rather than under theology!

Even though there was opposition to this embracing of pop psychology, one of its negative results has been the enthronement of feelings and experiences in the lives of believers. On every hand we hear statements like this: “I experienced it, so it must be true.” Or “I feel this is good for me, so it must be OK.” Even theology has experienced a

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shift from revelational truths to interpersonal truths. Revelation has shifted to self-discovery. The understanding of our faith comes through understanding ourselves. Sanctification has become a process of psychological strip-tease often in small group encounters. Testimonies can affirm truth, but they do not create it. All our experiences happen and in that sense are genuine, but not all of them are Scriptural. Whether they conform or not to Biblical truth is the ultimate test of their validity or lack of it.

I want also to speak briefly of the rise of parachurch organizations. The Navigators began in 1943. Youth for Christ in 1945. Young Life about the same time. CCC 1951. I do not imply that these organizations were not raised up by God or that they do not have a good and necessary ministry. But sometimes parachurch ministries tend to minimize the importance of the local church. Indeed, I can remember when such organizations were called extra church ministries; i.e., additional ministries to those of the local church. Then the new label appeared--parachurch, i.e., ; alongside the church, perhaps an attempt by the very label to link such ministries to the local church, though in reality they are usually not so linked. In the fall of 1996 CT reported on 50 Up and Comers in this country. I made a statistical analysis of those 50. 5 were related to educational institutions. 10 or so I put in a miscellaneous category (like the Congressman, and editors). 26 were related to or had started their own parachurch organizations. Only 9 were identified with a local church and its ministry. The preponderance of parachurch

ministries has both a positive and negative side. The positive is that we live in a country where you can establish with the blessing and tax exemption of the IRS such ministries. The negative is that they often minimize accountability. If you can't get along with the local church or with the organization you belong to, then leave, establish your own, appoint a board that you can pretty well control, and take your supporters with you. In that way accountability almost vanishes. But the principal concern is that the local church is pushed down the totem pole, and this ought not to be. Our Lord is building His church, and this should be the ^{best} focus of our service.

Finally, I want to mention how our labels for the gospel have changed through the years. When I was a student, we simply talked about the gospel. Then with the rise of Pentecostalism we learned of the full gospel. With the Lausanne Conference and a kind of Christian liberation theology came the whole gospel, which made social work a necessary part of the gospel. And off and on the Lordship gospel appears. Two weeks ago I saw on TV a leading evangelical leading a "God Save America" rally. Saving America is not our Great Commission. The rally ought to be called "God Save Americans." Can you imagine the apostle Paul traveling around the Roman empire holding God Save Rome rallies? Absolutely not. Speaking in tongues will not save; doing good works will not either; deciding to let Christ control the years of your life will not either. But that Christ died in our place for our sins and rose bodily from the tomb will. Let's stick to that, believe it with all our hearts, and

proclaim it as if it is a life or death matter---which it certainly is. The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing. Trends come and go. God's Word will never pass away. Some trends may be helpful, some will sidetrack or even be harmful. God's Word is always profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work. [equipping us for every good work.] ^{Let me} Give yourselves to the Word of the Lord and the Lord of the Word, learning it and Him, living it and Him, and loving it and Him all the days of your lives.