

President Theis, faculty, honored and relieved grads, bankrupt parents and friends of WOLBI. First of all, let me congratulate the grads on finishing today. The world and even our personal lives are too often 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 this commencement, though I think this is probably the most difficult assignment a person can have. All--faculty, grads, friends--all have their own idea what a commencement address ought to be, and everyone's 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 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!

Now I have lived a long time, not so long as Methuselah nor as his contemporary, but almost. With age come perspectives you don't have when you're young and experiences you can't have because you are young. Fifty years ago this past June I began my full time teaching ministry, so I do have a perspective that longevity gives. Primarily speaking to the grads, I want to focus on two areas today--trends and concerns I have observed during these years, and some truths and commitments which I hope others will observe in you.

Churchill once said: "Those who do not study history are doomed to repeat it." As I observe the changes in our culture during the years of my ministry, I would label today's culture this way: not postmodern or generation X, but a pop-culture. I mean, as the dictionary defines it, a popular culture often disseminated through the mass media. Pop-TV--whatever is popular, whether sex or family, is what is broadcast. Pop-advertising--you should have this because you deserve it. Pop-credit. How many credit cards do you have? Pop-church programs which are usually promoted with the word "exciting". Pop-music on every channel whether secular or Christian and in every club whether secular or the church. I'm not opposed to modern music, but I see this generation being cut off from some of the greats of the past like Bernard of Clairvaux, Isaac Watts, Wesley, Fanny Crosby simply because we do not sing their words, and I see them not learning theological truths through music, because substantial words are being replaced by mantra-like incantations. Pop-psychology. Learn to love yourself. Pop-seminars with their slick formulas. Pop-goals. Pop-sermons. Everything made easy and reduced to appeal to the broadest group at the lowest common denominator.

Here's a significant and basic trend that in turn has spawned several of these pop concepts. I have observed a shift away from our future hope as believers to concern for our present comforts. In my seminary days the church I attended had an annual prophecy conference from which I learned a lot from some of the best teachers in the country. Even in the earlier years of my ministry I was often invited to a number of prophecy conferences in various churches. But that interest seems to have diminished in recent years. Announce a men's meeting, a women's retreat, a financial planning seminar, a time management seminar, a parenting seminar, but don't announce a Bible conference or you're dead. Christian magazines have fewer and fewer articles on prophecy. In 1975 Eternity Magazine had only 1 that entire year, and it warned against focusing too much attention on the second coming. When CT began it was unashamedly premillennial. Now it has shifted to a more inclusive and even an anti-premillennial stance. In a relatively recent issue those of us who hold to an imminent rapture were labeled a sect. Just last week a friend told me that in her Bible study class no one knew what "the blessed hope" was. Even funerals tend to say less and less about the gospel, resurrection, heaven, judgment while more and more focusing on the life of the deceased.

Of course something had to come along to fill the vacuum left by this diminution of interest in our heavenly hope. What filled it? An increased focus and concern on this present life and a desire to

make it as comfortable as possible. This in turn generated concern about societal problems and a uniting with others who shared the same concerns no matter what their religious persuasions were. Sociology tended to submerge theology. Strange alliances were formed. These came to the fore in the 80s and 90s in relation to causes like abortion, prayer in the public schools, and general moral decay in society. But it also spilled over into a toleration of various non-Christian religions. Cooperation with other "nice" people concerned with the same issues in society began to blind even Christians to the absolute truth in theology that there is only one living and true God and only one way to heaven. An article by a senior editor of Christianity Today 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 seen that the supernatural permeated every area of life. Moslems have awed me by their reverence for God, their prayer-surrounded life, and their focus on ethics. ...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 Christianity Today.

Perhaps the document "Evangelicals and Catholics Together" in 1994 was a kind of climax to this togetherness. It acknowledged differences, but said that "on the ancient creeds and the core beliefs of Christianity we stand together." Not so. Certainly not on the core beliefs concerning the supreme authority of 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 bases of cooperation in societal concerns seeks to be built on a common theological base, on common core beliefs, it becomes deceptive, diverting our attention from eternal things to temporary things. Remember: it is better to be divided by truth than to be united in error.

This focus on this present life has made us feel that we need to provide more and more creature comforts for ourselves and our families. The first credit card ever was the Diners Club card issued in 1950. At first, it was only a promise to pay, but soon a credit line was added. Today Visa, Master Card, American Express, Discover are worldwide and the personal debt people owe is staggering as is the interest owed on that debt. Think in your own case how much more you could have contributed to the Lord's work had you not paid any credit card interest last year. Where your treasure is, there your heart is also, our Lord said. So the items charged on a credit card can often unmask where your heart truly is.

Another result of promoting comfort in this life has been the rise and increased dependence on pop psychology. I differentiate between therapeutic or clinical psychology which is concerned with relieving mental illness and pop psychology which attempts to promote happiness, a pleasing personality, self-love, self-esteem, self-improvement, self-realization, and self-actualization. In the 1950s evangelicals began to be more open to psychology embracing it even more in the 70s. Pop psychology borrowed terms and concepts from secularists with little or no evaluation or discernment and redefined biblical concepts like heart and the image of God in psychological terms. Counseling and caring for people, one writer said "is but a modern expression of the Great Commission." I seriously doubt that teaching people psychological principles is obeying the Lord's command to teach them the things He commanded. Seminars, articles, books, abound. In one recent year 87% of books published related to self and personal problems. With this emphasis has come the enthronement of feelings and experiences in the lives of believers. "I experienced it, so it must be true." "I feel this would be good for me, so it must be OK to have or to do." Or to put it in a syllogism: God wants me to be happy. Such and such will make me happy. Therefore, God approves of my having or doing such and such. Self-discovery has encroached on Bible study. Sanctification has become a process of psychological strip-tease often in small group encounters.

Many of you probably have never sung this song: "This world is not my home, I'm just a passing through. My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue. The angels beckon me from heaven's open door, and I can't feel at home in this world anymore. O Lord you know I have no

friend like you. If heaven's not my home then Lord what will I do. The angels beckon me from heaven's open door, and I can't feel at home in this world anymore." This doesn't express a sentiment of many believers would like to sing about today, for many would like to rewrite that last line "and I want to feel at home in this world more and more."

Efforts to improve society will not save. Our commission is not, as some of our evangelical leaders are promoting, it is not to save America. It is to save Americans. Can you imagine the Apostle Paul traveling around the Roman Empire holding "God save Rome" rallies? Psychology may help harmonize you with whatever is discordant in your life, but it will not give you eternal life. Doing good works, through better than doing evil ones, will not save. Speaking in tongues will not. Faithfully going to church will not. Deciding to let Christ control the years of your life will not either. But that believing that Christ died in our place and for our sins and that He rose bodily from the tomb will. If you are here today, a parent or friend of our of these grads and you are not a believer, nothing would please your child more than that today, right now, you would accept Christ as your personal Savior. But do not do it to please you child; do it because Jesus Christ is the only way to have forgiveness and eternal life for yourself.

Now let me focus, grads, on some things that are unchanging. First, you are a child of God. You will never be kicked out of that family or disowned by your heavenly Father. You can become a wayward child or one who honors his or her Father, but always you will be in the family. Second, you are a gifted child of God. Every one has at least one spiritual gift and probably more. These are to be used in whatever be your occupation in life for the glory of God. So be active in the Lord's work. Third, you are an educated, gifted child of God. You will forget things you learned at WOLBI but you cannot escape the impact that a Christian education has inevitably made on your life. This is a commencement and that includes a commencing of further education, and I don't necessarily mean formal. Read, read, read all your life. Keep learning. People are still asking basic questions about the Bible and the Christian life. And some will be looking to you as a graduate of a WOLBI for answers. Fourth, you are a gifted, educated child of God who has been allotted a specific number of days. Teach yourself to number your days and apply your heart to wisdom. If you are 20 and live to 70 you have 18,262 days left. If 30, 14,610. If 40, 10,957. If 50, 7,305. If 60, 3,652. If 70 you are running on fumes. I hope your ambition will always be to please your Savior. Commencement is only the completion of one chapter in your life. Most of you will live long enough to write other chapters. But the last chapter will be written at the judgment seat of Christ. So 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. God bless you grads. You'll need it.