

Service of Consecration
Austin Graduate School of Theology
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Words of Exhortation
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The coming school year will be one of historic proportion. Claiming that what we do this year will be of historic proportion probably leaves some of you thinking, “This confirms it! He really is delusional.” Granted, it is unlikely that what we do and say here will be recorded in any major journalistic venue. However, I’m not being hyperbolic. Seriously, the coming school year will be one of historic proportion.

Consider what is ahead of us. We are in the beginning stages of a \$3 million capital campaign. Of that amount, over \$1 million has been raised in cash and pledges. That’s the good news. Now here’s the—and I refuse to refer to it as the bad news—challenge and it’s formidable. We have to raise another \$2 million.

As you know, the reason for the capital campaign is to fund a remodeling project for the building we recently purchased. That project is on an ambitious construction schedule to meet the deadline to vacate our current building by January 1.

\$2 million to raise and an impending move creates a degree of uncertainty about what to expect. In the midst of all this uncertainty, we can be certain about one thing. We can expect the unexpected this year. Recognizing this, two matters are of utmost importance for us.

First, maximum cooperation with one another is essential. That has been our history at Austin Grad, and I want us to draw on that legacy. When we face unknown and unexpected challenges we will naturally experience anxiety. It is critical that we handle the anxiety appropriately. Let’s be prepared to meet the challenges, especially the unexpected ones, with courage and grace.

The second matter is the most important. The capital campaign and the circumstances around our impending move to a new campus could easily distract us from our primary purpose, the fundamentals of our mission, and keeping first things first.

Therefore, let’s take to heart the words of scripture we’ve heard read today. Each passage, in some manner, addresses the importance of teaching. In the readings, we were reminded that Jesus was a teacher. He gave teaching a high priority when he commissioned the apostles. The responsibility and priority of teaching was then passed by the apostles to the church.

I recognize that the church has many ministries. All are important. However, none is more important than the ministry of teaching the Christian faith. All Christians are to

be taught starting prior to conversion on to initiation into the Christian way, and throughout the remainder of life.

All are to be taught. However, not all are called to be teachers. Historically, the church has set aside and called those gifted and equipped to pass on the faith. In time, the church established schools or seminaries to teach and train those it called to be its ministers, teachers, and preachers. Our School plays an important role in that undertaking.

Recognizing the danger of distraction in the coming school year we will focus on our primary purpose. Doing that requires us to give attention to outcomes. We need to focus on outcomes not only because our accrediting agency expects it, but because we are concerned about how well we are fulfilling our mission to educate Christian servants and edify churches.

An anecdote will verify this concern. In his essay in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, Professor L. Gregory Jones recalls a sobering moment regarding outcomes. Each semester at the seminary where he teaches, students taking the homiletics class anxiously wait for the day their preaching texts will be assigned. Most students express their fear of being assigned the text about Balaam's ass or some obscure text from Chronicles. They all hope for a more familiar text like the Parable of the Prodigal, etc.

Professor Jones stood back and watched as the assignment list was posted. Anxious students gathered around. He recalls one student loudly complaining about his assigned text being from the book of Hebrews because "he had hoped to get a text from the New Testament!" The professor confides that he has often wondered about the impact of that student's ministry to the church.

Yes, we must be concerned about student outcomes this year because we are entrusted with equipping them to serve the church and the world. Although it is not always popular and some students struggle to pass, it is good that we have a rigorous Bible Content Exit Exam. Equipping our students to appropriately interpret and apply the Bible to, for, and with the church is at the heart of our purpose.

This primary purpose can be traced back to our beginnings. In 1918, the forefathers of our School, set about teaching Bible for credit through an arrangement with the University of Texas. We are far removed from those days. Although we no longer have the arrangement with UT, I'm confident that the outcomes we seek are similar to those of our ancestors.

We aim for our students to have greater knowledge of the Bible. However, biblical knowledge alone is inadequate. Biblical knowledge must be married to a better understanding of the historic Christian faith. Even then, the outcome will be less than what is required for faithful ministry in the church and world unless knowledge and understanding is wedded to faithful practice in the church and world. According to John's gospel, loving Jesus is the true test of one's practice of the faith. We show our

love for Jesus when our lives (i.e., our practice of the faith) are shaped according to Jesus' life.

Therefore, it is important for us to enable our students to know the Bible and understand the faith so they can more fully practice or live the faith. In turn, they will be equipped to pass on the faith through effective teaching and preaching. Today, we are being consecrated to serve Jesus through the mission of our School. Let's seek to hear a word from the Lord based on our earlier reading of John 21:15-17. May it help us remember our primary purpose. May it keep us focused on our fundamental mission. May it lead us to keep first things first.

In the context of our scripture reading we find the disciples gathered around Jesus on the lakeshore. The resurrected Jesus called them together around a small fire where he has prepared them breakfast. As I imagine the scene, I see the disciples experiencing mixed emotions that morning; excitement and anxiety, anticipation and fear. Surely these were acute for Peter.

Jesus pointedly queries Peter three times about the depth of his love for and commitment to him. The three questions are matched by three charges. In these charges we see that love for Jesus is practiced by feeding and tending his flock. A key qualification for this task is a love for Jesus characterized by dependence, humility, and obedience.

As you know, the shepherd metaphor Jesus uses has a long history of application in the Ancient Near East and especially in the Old Testament. The shepherd's task included guiding the flock to good pasture and water, and protecting the sheep from predators and guarding them from their own tendency to wander into dangerous places. This guidance required the shepherd to know the terrain well.

In terms of applying this image to our situation, I have nothing new or profound to offer. However, let's use the image of the shepherd to remind us of our opportunities and responsibilities in the new school year.

First, let's give attention to the central role our faculty plays in the fulfillment of our mission. Their work is a serious responsibility and largely determines the outcomes we considered earlier. Through their teaching our faculty will instruct, equip, and even correct those who would serve God by ministering, teaching, and preaching in the church. It is crucial that the content of their teaching be right and that the manner of delivery be humble and obedient. Both content and manner reflects their love for Jesus. Speaking of outcomes, innumerable people and churches will be affected by our professors through our graduates. A majority of these people and churches will remain unseen and unknown to us. The potential of this far reaching impact is stunning and humbling.

Although the faculty's role is central, it does not mean their role is superior to that performed by the staff and administration. These servants work quietly among us. They are often less visible, but this does not mean their work is less important. The staff and

administration have contact with our students in settings other than the classroom. This allows them to become conduits of communication within the School. This communication is very important, but we must be on guard and use wisdom lest it degenerate into gossip.

Regarding communication, let's all remember to follow official procedure when dealing with problems. Academic matters should be addressed first to the academic department head. Behavioral matters are addressed to the Dean of Students. Once again, the staff and administration have a unique role in shepherding our students. Like the faculty, your manner of dealing with the students will reflect your love for Jesus.

I'm pleased that our student association officers are with us today. They are in the unusual situation of being both sheep and shepherds within our School network. These officers will see and hear things the remainder of us will not. Admittedly, we'll not want to see or need to hear everything. However, the student officers can be the eyes and ears of the School. Not in the sense of being spies, but in the sense of noticing needs and helping initiate the proper response. These officers also have the difficult, but important task of helping us build community at the School. I urge them to work with us so that we all will live up to our high calling.

The coming school year will be one of historic proportion. I am convinced our love for Jesus, our care for these students from his flock, and our commitment to the mission of this School will inspire us to work with maximum cooperation. Although there will be numerous distractions this year, let's remember our primary purpose and keep first things first by focusing on our fundamental mission. Our aim, like that of our forefathers at this School, is to teach and guide our students to greater biblical knowledge and a better understanding of the historic Christian faith. With this knowledge and understanding they will be enabled to more fully practice and live the faith. In turn, they will be equipped to pass on the faith to innumerable people and churches. Such an outcome is worthy of our best efforts this year. I look forward to seeing how the Chief Shepherd uses each of us to nurture the flock given to our care at Austin Grad during the 2007-2008 school year.