

AlbertMohler.com

That Our Joy May Be Complete: The Essence of the Christian Ministry

Like 38 Send

Friday, May 20, 2011

This is the season of commencement. High schools, colleges, and universities mark graduation at the end of the academic year. Auditoriums, chapels, convention centers, stadiums, and campus lawns are filled with graduates, family members, faculty, and guests for what is almost always a formal event.

The human species thrives on ceremony. We mark the most momentous events of our lives with a formality that does not mark the ordinary days of our ordinary lives. Something extraordinary is taking place here, and we both sense and know it.

High school graduates line up to receive their diplomas, marking one of the signal events of their lives as adolescence gives way to dawning adulthood. College graduates cross the stage to receive degrees with minds already on the next stage of life, a job or further specialized education. Medical schools graduate physicians, who head for residency. Law schools confer law degrees and send out litigators.



But what we witness today is not merely the accomplishment of students who have earned respected academic degrees and new credentials. The commencement ceremony of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary represents the gifting of God-called ministers of the Gospel for the churches, the sending out of missionaries who will carry the Gospel to the nations, and the faithfulness of those who have answered the call of God to serve the church and to preach the Word.

Over the past few weeks, much of the media's attention has been directed to the teachings of radio preacher Harold Camping, who has famously predicted that the end of the age will come precisely at six o'clock tomorrow evening. If so, you will hold your degrees for less than thirty-six hours, and your hopes and plans for ministry on earth had better be measured in minutes rather than years.

Of course, this preacher has done exactly what Christ commanded his church not to do — to set dates and to claim a knowledge of the timing of his coming that is not given to us. Mr. Camping is a false prophet who has disobeyed the plain teachings of the Scriptures while claiming to have discovered a hidden code in the Scriptures. The church is to be eagerly awaiting the return of the Lord Jesus Christ, not staring at a calendar as if we have been given knowledge that is denied us. We are to be found faithfully at work for Christ's kingdom when he comes — not arguing about dates and hours.

At the same time, we do know that the time is short. The Church Militant is called to live every day with the sure and certain knowledge that Christ is coming, that this age will come to an end, and that every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

Until then, we are assigned the task of making disciples of all the nations, building up the church of the Lord Jesus

Christ through the preaching of the Scriptures, the establishment and nurture of Gospel churches, the raising of godly children, and the work of the Kingdom.

At the conclusion of this ceremony we will sing the seminary hymn, written in 1860 by Basil Manly, Jr. for the seminary's first commencement. As that hymn reminds us, these graduates are "Soldiers of Christ, in truth arrayed." That is an astounding affirmation — that God uses human instruments as the proclaimers and heralds of his revealed truth. We will see them come to receive degrees and diplomas as they strengthen the great army of God by their deployment to serve in a new and vital capacity. What Christian would not want to witness such an event?

That hymn closes with the poignant realization that "we meet to part, but part to meet, when earthly labors are complete." And so, here we are . . . meeting to part, but parting to meet.

The New Testament epistle we know as 1 John does not follow the traditional form of the first century letter. There is no greeting, and no introduction. The first three verses of the epistle are, in reality, a massive run-on sentence in the Greek text. Some scholars, such as I. Howard Marshall, suggest that this is really not a letter at all, but a sermon from the Apostle John that was circulated among the churches, cherished for its urgency and powerful truth.

By the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, it is the Word of God. Whether letter or sermon, it is a much-needed word. I draw our attention to the first four verses of 1 John, chapter one:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

John the Apostle begins by affirming the centrality of Jesus Christ to all that we know, all that we hope, and all that we preach. He specifically affirms the truth of the incarnation of Christ — the great news that he described in his gospel with the truth that "the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us." The church of the Lord Jesus Christ has indeed beheld his glory, the glory of the only-begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.

That Word is from the beginning. John speaks in the first person for the apostles, who heard the Lord, saw him in the flesh with their eyes, and touched him with their hands. Later in this epistle, we are warned that there are those who deny that "Jesus Christ has come in the flesh." [1 John 4:2] In 2 John 1:7, John will warn: "For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. Such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist."

The incarnation of the Word is the central truth of Christianity and the very foundation of our faith. As John tells us, he writes concerning the word of life — "the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us."

That was the message of the Apostles, and it is the message that is now entrusted to us. The graduates we celebrate today are called by God to be the heralds of the truth that eternal life is found in Jesus Christ, and in Christ alone. They are called to declare that salvation has come, and that the forgiveness of sins and life everlasting comes to all who call upon the name of the Lord and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

John expresses this hope when he writes, "that which we have seen and heard we proclaim to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ." These graduates join the long line of faithful heralds who have followed the Apostles by teaching and preaching and taking this same Gospel. We preach the Gospel and share the Gospel in order that sinners may come to the saving knowledge of Christ, and then join in fellowship with all believers throughout all the ages. The even greater affirmation in this text is that the redeemed in Christ have fellowship, not only with each other in the communion of saints, but "with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ."

This assignment — the preaching and teaching of this Gospel — represents a calling that exceeds all others in eternal importance. The graduates we celebrate today are not professionals entering one profession among others. They are

standing in the faith and message of the Apostles, commissioned by Christ to feed his sheep and let the nations be glad.

In verse four, John states that he has written these things “so that our joy many be complete.” The New Testament speaks often of joy, but it is an awkward word in our contemporary vocabulary. We tend to confuse joy with mere happiness or an emotional state. And yet, putting together the comprehensive New Testament witness to joy, what John is talking about here is something much greater than happiness, and much more lasting than any emotional state.

John is writing about the joy that defies death, the joy that gives meaning to life, the joy that is tasted on earth but known fully only in heaven. John is writing about the joy that fuels the Christian calling, the joy that brings satisfaction as it rests and trusts in Christ, the joy that looks back to the cross and the empty tomb, the joy that marks Christian worship and service. John warns of a joy that can be lost if the truth is denied and the Gospel is subverted, but a joy that the world can never take away.

The joy we rightly claim this day for these graduates is a joy that cannot be imprinted on a diploma or conferred as a degree. It is a joy that summoned them to study, sustained them through years of arduous learning, and enlivened them in the late hours of the night and the breaking hours of the dawn. It is a joy we now share as we celebrate what God has done and the promise these graduates represent. But it is a hungry joy that looks forward to even greater joys ahead.

This is far superior to happiness. The Gospel has enemies. The church experiences tribulations. The ministry comes with heartaches as well as gratifications. But, as the book of James reminds us, we are to count it all joy.

John ends this introductory statement, not only to affirm the church’s joy, but “so that our joy may be made complete.” We cannot rest until the nations are made glad in the Gospel. We cannot cease our labors until the work is done. Only Christ can complete the joy that we now taste and share, and every generation of Christians is to serve faithfully until Christ completes our joy.

We meet to part, and part to meet. We find great joy in these graduates and in this occasion. We know full well that this moment will never be repeated, that this graduating class will never again be gathered together like this on earth. We know that within a few short hours all these chairs will be gone, the graduates will have dispersed, and only the leaves of grass will remain to testify of what has been done here.

We are at peace with that, though there is both joy and sorrow on this day — for there is a parting as much as a meeting that we experience here. In this is joy. A joy the world cannot understand, a joy that every Christian knows, and a joy that is not yet complete.

Graduates, you surely have a sense today of what Southern Seminary means to you. You have no adequate sense, however, of what you mean to Southern Seminary, to this faculty, and to this assembly. We celebrate you, congratulate you, and find great joy in you.

Now, go serve the Lord with gladness. Go to the pulpit, go to the church, go to the nations, and go with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Go . . . that our joy may be complete.

This is a commencement address and charge to graduates of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, delivered May 20, 2011 by R. Albert Mohler, Jr., President. The commencement ceremony may be viewed live at 10:00 a.m. EDT at www.sbts.edu.

Illustration: *John the Evangelist*, by Guido Reni

