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Starting Something You Cannot Finish: The Eschatology of Christian Mission

Serve, preach, teach, and tell the world about Jesus until they put you in a box or until Jesus comes. And all will be well. Start what you cannot finish, and trust that Christ will finish what He has started.

Friday, May 14, 2010

Commencements come and commencements go. There will be thousands of graduation ceremonies around the world this season, and each will mark an important turning point in life. We have become so accustomed to these transitions and the need for marking such occasions that many schools now hold something like a commencement for kindergartners ready for first grade.

Still, there is something momentous about a formal commencement ceremony in an institution of higher learning. Before us today are a host of graduates in all their array, and a distinguished faculty in all its regalia. Any passerby would know that something important is going on here, and most will recognize the basic structure of the event. Degrees will be awarded, pictures will be taken, congratulations will be extended, and all the pomp and circumstance will be observed.

Then, what? To the average observer of an academic graduation, that just about sums it all up. The gowns will be put away, the programs will be filed for memory, the degrees will be hung on walls, and life goes on.

That is where this commencement differs from so many others. Most graduates are sent out to the next phase of life, learning, and profession — encouraged by the congratulations and qualified by newly held degrees. But those who graduate from this school today, though rightly congratulated, are being sent out to put everything they have, everything they are, everything they have learned, and everything they hope for, on the line for mission and ministry in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

They are not starting careers. Indeed, this may end their careers. They are not newly-minted professionals. In fact, they may be largely useless in the eyes of the secular world. They are now deployed for a life of ministry that runs counter to the wisdom of the world.

The call to the Christian ministry is a profoundly counter-cultural reality. The conventional wisdom just does not fit. As children, we are taught the adage that we are not to start what we cannot finish. But these ministers of the Gospel will never really finish anything, and they are not very qualified to start anything. As the Apostle Paul told the Corinthians: *“According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.”* [1 Corinthians 3:10-11]

They will take their places in a long line of faithful ministers. They will build upon the foundation laid by the apostles, and that foundation is Jesus Christ. They will toil and serve and witness and teach and preach and lead and build, but they



will die with more undone than done. Some will serve long, some may serve only a short time in this earthly life, but they will serve a cause they cannot complete; they will tell a story they cannot conclude.

The American dream does not fit this calling. That dream calls for years of preparation to be followed by formal qualification, decades of professional accomplishment, and a happy retirement. Our hope today must be that these ministers of the Gospel will never retire, for the ministry is never accomplished. They may in due time be redeployed, but never really retired — never ready to rest and merely collect a pension or cash in their retirement accounts and live a life of leisure. They are to serve to the end, learn to the end, teach to the end, and be faithful to the end.

As a matter of fact, the Christian ministry is as concerned about the end as the beginning. With Paul, we look back to the beginning, when Christ declared the establishment of his church, commissioned the church with the Gospel, and promised that the gates of Hell will never prevail against it. But we also look forward to the end, and that ending puts everything into perspective. The Christian ministry is a profoundly eschatological calling.

Consider what John saw in the Book of Revelation, chapter 5:

And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. And he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne. And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they sang a new song, saying,

“Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.” [Revelation 5:6-10, *ESV*]

This vision of the throne of Christ and the opening of the scroll declares the victory of God in the Lamb, who was slain, and is alone worthy “to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing.” It is He who sits on the throne forever and ever. It is his marriage supper we await as a multitude with the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder. He rides the white horse and is faithful and true. He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood and known by the name of the Word of God. He is the one who casts Satan into the pit, who captures the beast, who throws the false prophet and the deceiver into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur. It is He who vindicates his martyrs and brings them to life. It is He for whom Death and Hades give up their dead. It is He from whose mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and He rules them with a rod of iron. He is the one who makes all things new, who judges the nations and all who have ever lived. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, and it is He who brings the new heaven and the new earth, the new Jerusalem, prepared as a bride for her husband. It is He who said behold I am coming soon. It is He who completes what only He can begin.

And He does complete that which He begins. As the Apostle Paul declares, we know whom we have believed, and we are convinced that He is able to guard until that Day what He has entrusted to us. [1 Timothy 1:12] Without this confidence, the Christian ministry is a losing proposition. We never get to see a single saint perfected — not in this life. We never get to see all things made well. We never get to see every tear wiped away and every eye dry — not yet, anyway.

Behind us is a line of faithful Christians who toiled and served and preached and planted and tended and witnessed and died. The graduates we see before us today get in that line, are indeed already in that line, and they will never get to finish what they start — and we can live with that.

Why? Only because Christ will finish what He has started. Only because we are absolutely confident that this is not about us, but about Christ — all about Christ.

And we are not alone. As John saw, before the throne of God are arrayed men and women from every tribe and language and people and nation. All of them ransomed together by the blood of the Lamb who was slain, now made a kingdom and priests to God, set to reign with Christ on the earth.

Let’s consider what this means. The Father’s purpose is to glorify himself in the Son, the Lamb, through whom sinners

are ransomed by his blood — men and women from every tribe and language and people and nation. In these blood-bought saints the curse is reversed, sins are forgiven, and Babel is turned into a thunderous and endless chorus of common praise.

This vision frames the reality of the Christian ministry. Our task is to lay our lives on the line in service to Christ, knowing that this vision is truer than true and absolutely assured. The Gospel is to be preached to the nations, knowing that Christ will redeem sinners by his blood from every nation, every tribe, every language. We go, we send, and we sustain with this vision in view. We declare that today is the acceptable day of salvation, and we declare to all people everywhere that salvation is to be found in the name of Christ and in Christ alone.

These graduates will join the faithful line of Christian pastors and evangelists and missionaries who have preached the same Gospel — that Christ saves sinners. We tell this Gospel again and again, telling sinners of their plight and of the just judgment of God upon sin. We tell of heaven and hell, and make the difference clear. We point to Christ, and to his cross and resurrection, making clear that our salvation is his work and his free gift to all who believe. We call sinners to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, to confess him as Lord, and to receive the forgiveness of sins and life everlasting. We tell both the beginning and the end of this great story of our salvation — the story of the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world.

This vision transforms the Christian ministry from a profession into a calling that makes no sense according to the wisdom of the world. The vast majority of Christian ministers and pastors have served without the slightest attention of the world, completely lacking in its accolades and attention. They preached the Word, in season and out of season, evangelized, baptized, taught, tended, wept, and cared — and they were laid in humble boxes and lowered into to the waiting earth. And all is well.

By the untold thousands, ministers and missionaries have become martyrs for the sake of Christ, impaled, burned at the stake, beheaded, shot, and strangled. And all is well.

Most of these faithful servants never received a theological education like that received by these graduates. Some of them received what education they had by reading in the dim light of a candle, holding every moment of learning dear, even when their seminary was a prison cell. We are all together in the School of Christ, and from that school we never graduate until He claims his church and clothes it in righteousness. On that day we will not be wearing the regalia of earthly schools or brandishing the faded glory of earthly degrees. We will be bowing to the Lamb, together, forever.

Graduates, as you experience this day and look ahead, you no doubt are aiming for some future, armed with some plans. May those plans and purposes be godly purposes, with the ministry of the Word and the commission of the Gospel your passions. But, as you look to the future, think not of retirement and the security of the American dream. Be ready to lose everything the world holds dear in order to gain what the world cannot give.

Be armed with the vision of the Lamb before the throne, and of the reigning saints from every tribe and nation and people and language. Take the Gospel to the ends of the earth and let the nations rejoice in Christ. Serve the Lord with gladness and tend the flock of God with love and care. Preach the Word, in season and out of season. Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also. Be those of which the world is not worthy.

Serve, preach, teach, and tell the world about Jesus until they put you in a box or until Jesus comes. And all will be well. Start what you cannot finish, and trust that Christ will finish what He has started. Serve so long as you live and live so long as you serve, and we will one day meet together again — when we smell sulfur and see a Lamb.

This is a commencement address and charge to graduates of [The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary](#), delivered May 14, 2010 by R. Albert Mohler, Jr., President. The commencement ceremony may be viewed live at 10:00 EDT at: www.sbts.edu

This message completes a series begun with the December 2009 commencement address, "[Starting Something You Cannot Finish: Christian Ministry from Generation to Generation](#)."

The image is a portion of the Isenheim Altarpiece by Matthias Grunewald, painted between 1512 and 1516. This

section depicts John the Baptist and the Lamb of God.

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