

Fall Convocation Address

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According to everyone's favorite academic source, Wikipedia, a convocation is a calling together for a special purpose before beginning a project. The image that comes to mind is a huddle in football, in which the quarterback not only calls the play but also, at certain important times, seeks to inspire his teammates before an important drive. Any football fan my age or older will remember the greatest drive in football history led by John Elway in 1987. It's simply known as "The Drive." The Denver Broncos trailed the Cleveland Browns by a touchdown in the AFC championship game and had the ball their own two yard line with five minutes to go. Elway led them on a 98 yard drive that tied the game, which they later won in overtime. In the huddle before the drive, Elway not only called a play but uttered the memorable words, "We got 'em right where we want 'em."

So consider this occasion the huddle before the drive, where I get to not only lay out the game plan but perhaps provide some inspiration as we begin the year. Specifically, I will answer two questions: Who are we? and, Where do we want to go?

As to the first question, who are we, that is best answered by looking at our past. Cornerstone University was founded as the Grand Rapids Baptist Bible Institute in 1941. More specifically, it was established by a group of fundamentalist Christians known as the General Association of Regular Baptists. The term "fundamentalist" has acquired negative connotations nowadays; but back then it simply meant a Christian who was committed to defending the basic doctrines of the faith. These were mainly historic Christian beliefs such as the deity of Christ and the authority of Scripture, though fundamentalists added a few innovations of their own. And since traditional Christianity was under attack in the twentieth century, starting a fundamentalist church or college was something that a lot of conservative Christians were doing at the time.

Throughout its history, however, Cornerstone University grew and broadened beyond its original founding. The college began in the basement of Wealthy Street Baptist Church, but in the 1960s the school acquired a 100-acre farm northeast of Grand Rapids long before anyone knew what a Beltline was. The name of the college also reflected a broadening of the original school, becoming Cornerstone College in 1994. Our student profile also reflects this expansion of our Christian identity. While we still have a good share of Baptists, there are for more non-denominational Christians on campus than Baptists. And rules have changed over time. Unlike earlier students, Cornerstone students today can wear their hair any length they want, go to movies, and even dance.

So Cornerstone University has grown and broadened while holding fast to its fundamental Christian beliefs. What does that mean for the future? Who do we want to become? As colleges change over time, there are two extremes that can develop. First, there are colleges that have fled from their heritage as an embarrassing vestige of an earlier era. In fact, the dominant theme in the history of American higher education is secularization. The historian George Marsden wrote a book chronicling the story of how schools such as Harvard, Yale, and Princeton began as Christian colleges and evolved into secular universities where seemingly any perspective but orthodox Christianity was tolerated.

In fact, the fear of secularization has haunted Christian colleges in the twentieth century. Schools such as Cornerstone have constructed safeguards to ensure that it doesn't happen here. We have, for example, a doctrinal statement which is signed by every professor and staff member as part of their contract. Given the way that institutions can drift over time, such safeguards are necessary and worthy.

But it's also true that in their desire to combat secularization, colleges can err to an opposite extreme—that of embracing their original blueprint so tightly that they refuse to adapt to the world around them. They can perceive any change as leading inevitably toward secularism. In the process, they can replace biblical Christianity as their model with a particular way that Christians thought and acted in the early 20th century.

In other words, a college's heritage can become a shell that it hides under rather than something that motivates it to grow and develop. Rather than simply seeking to preserve who we were fifty years ago, we need to understand the culture that we find ourselves in today and think intentionally about how we can best fulfill our mission and influence that culture for Christ. Who, then, do we want to become? Let me suggest three traits:

First, we should be a university that takes the life of the mind seriously. That may go without saying—we're a university, after all. But it needs to be emphasized nonetheless, since historically we evangelicals have not done very well at loving God with our minds. In our haste to evangelize the world, we have often failed to do the hard work of understanding our world and applying ourselves to diligent study.

Loving God with our minds is not our only calling, but it is an important one, and it's the particular one that Christian universities are designed to do. If we don't get this one right, everything else is meaningless. I recently read a book by the head of Starbucks, in which he explained that Starbucks's mission is "to inspire and nurture the human spirit." That sounds great, but if Starbucks doesn't start by brewing some good coffee, the rest of their mission is basically meaningless. In the same way, as a Christian university, if we don't foster academic excellence, then the rest of our mission isn't going to happen. All of us—students, faculty, and staff—must be committed to putting learning first, not because it's the most important thing in life, but because it's the particular contribution of a university to the body of Christ.

Second, even though we are no longer a Baptist college, we should seek to become Baptist in the best sense of the term. The core belief of Baptists is an emphasis on the priesthood of the believer—that is, that every Christian has wisdom and insight, regardless of their educational level. This belief can and has been taken to an extreme, and there are historically Baptist colleges that have used this trait to justify just about anything. But if understood properly, the Baptist heritage means that each of us has a unique perspective and something to offer the community. It means that Cornerstone should be known as a place where vigorous dialogue and even disagreement can take place. While we are committed to our core Christian beliefs, we don't have to agree on every particular theological, scientific, or political issue. In fact, having healthy debates on such issues can help all of us learn more. They make college an exciting place to be.

For students, this means that while you're here primarily to learn from your professors, you also have something to contribute to the intellectual community. For Cornerstone to thrive as a Christian college, we need all of its members, including students and staff, to participate in the conversation.

Third, we should prepare students to engage today's culture in meaningful ways. Cultural engagement, however, is used by Christians so much nowadays that it's in danger of becoming a platitude, so let me be more specific. First of all, we need to recognize that the world consists of many different cultures, not a single generic one. We need to be a university that prepares Christians to value other cultures and thrive in them. That doesn't happen by sitting in a classroom but by getting off campus and immersing oneself in different cultures, both here in Grand Rapids and around the world. My dream is that someday it would be impossible to graduate from Cornerstone without a passport, and that our students would have as many stamps on their passports as possible.

Second, engaging the culture doesn't mean defeating the culture. Evangelicals often use the term "Christian worldview." Sometimes we seem to convey the notion that our goal is to help students assemble an airtight Christian worldview which they can use to defeat the ideas of the secular culture awaiting them when they graduate. I would suggest, however, that things are not that simple. A Christian worldview is dynamic, not static. It's meant to grow and adapt as we mature in the Christian life and encounter new people and ideas. Thus, while we want to prepare students to influence culture, we should be open to being influenced by our culture as well. For example, secular Americans have taught us Christians a lot in recent years about what it means to be good stewards of our natural resources. We should be willing to learn from them and go even further in not just caring for creation but articulating why we're doing it.

Furthermore, we need to get beyond simply engaging or critiquing culture to actually making culture. That's what humans were created to do in the first place—to tend the garden. The fact that the garden has become distorted by sin doesn't mean that we still can't fulfill our human calling to cultivate and develop it, especially at

a Christian college. In other words, teaching and inspiring *creativity* is central to who we are. If a film major, for example, graduates from Cornerstone with the notion that the only purpose for making films is to open a “window” for sharing the gospel, rather than to make excellent films themselves, then we have failed to be a truly Christian university.

In sum, standing up for Truth in the midst of a secular culture is often best done indirectly. Let me illustrate, as I often do, with a sports analogy: Getting in good shape physically is a worthy goal, and some people attack this goal head-on: They obsess over the proper workouts, they calculate their calorie intake and make sure that they get the proper balance of nutrition, exercise, and rest. Others do so simply by living a vibrant, healthy life. If you’re at the beach, you body surf in the waves; if you’re in Colorado, you hike a mountain. You play football with your kids. When it’s time to eat, you eat food that reflects the goodness of God’s natural creation, not the product of a chemistry experiment. In the process, indirectly, you get healthier.

I would suggest that our goal of influencing the culture is often best accomplished indirectly. We can, of course, obsess over Truth and our Christian worldview and seek to argue the surrounding culture to it. But we probably won’t be very convincing—and even if we are, like the fitness fanatic at a potluck dinner, we won’t be much fun to be around. Instead, as a Christian college we should prepare our students to simply *be* the church, and the truth of the Gospel will become apparent.

Cornerstone University should produce graduates who know what it means to create and cultivate thriving communities wherever they end up. Our business majors should not only know how to witness for Christ at the water cooler. They should learn to create sustainable businesses that bring economic opportunity to poor communities. Our musicians should actually make culture, not just redeem culture. History majors should go on to do first-rate historical scholarship, not just philosophize about it. In sum, college should be a place where we learn to develop our talents, live life to fullest, and use our lives to bless the communities that we live in. In the process, truth will come out.

So as we begin the drive this year, let me use this huddle to remind us of our basic purpose: to be a Christ-centered learning community that is both academically excellent and spiritually contagious. We want to become a university that makes Christ pre-eminent over every aspect—from the classroom to the dining room, from to the dormitory to the gym. My prayer is that Cornerstone would become a university where we love God with our minds, learn from each other, and produce graduates whose full lives cannot help but influence the cultures around them.