

Pittsburgh Theological Seminary

Baccalaureate

May 27, 2009

The Rev. Dr. Charles Partee, P.C. Rossin Professor Emeritus of Church History

According to legend, the noble and graceful swan sings a farewell song before his final departure. I am more often associated with the turkey than the swan, but this sermon could be my swan song, if I were not too chicken to say anything fowl.

When your committee hit the bottom of the barrel and asked me to preach at this event, I was honored and delighted. Especially since the baccalaureate designation for this service is completely inappropriate because no one is receiving a bachelor's degree tomorrow. This means that whatever I say inappropriately will fit the occasion splendidly.

When I graduated from seminary (By the way, Thomas Aquinas was in my class but I was not in his class), we had an authentic baccalaureate service because in those days everyone received the degree bachelor of divinity. I salute you. You are to be recognized accomplished masters and mighty doctors. As far as I can remember none of you were present at my baccalaureate service so I thought I might save myself some effort by updating for you masters the baccalaureate sermon delivered to us bachelors. The problem is I cannot remember who the preacher was, the text he read, nor a single word of the sermon of which I assume I heard some. So fades the glory of the world. A wise man once said if you want to know how deeply you will be remembered – put your hand in a bucket of water, withdraw it quickly and contemplate the hole that remains.

The challenge today, and my great resolve, is that your baccalaureate speaker will be remembered longer than mine. Therefore I am going to try first to drill one word into your skull

working through thick or thin, as we might say, and, second, to make available an artist to tattoo today's text onto any part of your anatomy you deem appropriate.

The word for today, and your life in ministry, is "Paideia." The text for today, and your life in ministry, is 1 Peter 4:10. "As each has received a gift, employ it for one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace." In this verse there are some very big words, including God and grace. The English word for employ summons the Greek word "deacon", and the word for steward summons "ecumenical." Especially called to your attention is the word "gift." As each has received a charisma, employ it for one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace.

There are many good and great gifts. In rustic imagery there is the under-shepherd leading the flock beside the still waters to lie down in green pastures, but in God's nature of things the sheep dog nipping at the heels of slow moving sheep has a gift too. There is nothing quite so sharp as the teeth of a barking dogma.

That was the end of the introduction. Now let's talk about Paideia and your role in helping parents bring up their children in the paideia of the Lord. A good place to start is Werner Jaeger's famous three volume study of the concept – appropriately entitled *Paideia*. According to Jaeger, paideia refers to the intentional transmission of values and virtues. It was a dominant concept in Greco-Roman culture. Therefore, it encompasses and may be translated as civilization, culture, tradition, education, transmission, teaching, instruction, guidance, nurture, and discipline. Understanding paideia, Jaeger claims, is the key to unlocking the glory that was Greece.

On this subject you have heard me speak more often than you desired. I have testified to you that I thought I became a Christian after graduating from seminary and I am hopeful that the same thing can happen to you. Margaret was still working downtown and I was sitting in a drug

store reading Oscar Cullmann's little study on life after death contrasting Plato's view of the immortality of soul with the New Testament's view of resurrection of the body. I got a hot flash of an intensity that might have startled a Wesleyan in which not only was my heart strangely warmed – my brain became overheated.

As an aside, you may recall the classical Greeks believed that every time a male person got a brilliant idea the fire in his brain singed a follicle and a hair fell off. In those days a man could check his IQ by simply scratching his head.

Putting aside the aside and returning to resurrection, I did not finish and have never been able to drink a strawberry milkshake because I finally saw the difference between the human wisdom I had worked so diligently to acquire and the divine wisdom which God so graciously revealed in Jesus Christ. My intense excitement with my new understanding of the relation of human wisdom and divine revelation resulted in a sermon on body and soul, resurrection and immortality during the first month at my first church. Unfortunately, this sermon made the organist extremely angry and she quit that afternoon. This event actually improved our music program, but was not my intention. Sometimes evangelical truth and pastoral tact are delicately balanced. Before your people care what you know, they need to know you care. But truth is mighty and will prevail. Rough hew it how we may.

Let me back up and tell you something else. Believe it or not, I quarterbacked my high school football team. You can believe I did not receive the acclaim I felt I deserved. After one particularly spectacular victory, our female fans came pouring exultantly onto the field as soon as the gun sounded. Of course, quarterbacks always think ahead, so I whipped off my helmet in order to be able to participate more spontaneously in any display of gratitude that happened to come in my direction. To my dismay, I was kissed not by one of our nubile cheerleaders, as I had

rather hoped, but by the coach's wife, which was an accurate tribute to my athletic contribution that evening but did absolutely nothing for my 17 year old heart.

However, I draw no point from that sad fact. The point is that on our team we had a fullback who was very strong but – to put the matter as delicately as possible – not much of a scholar. Billy could never seem to learn that plays ending in even numbers went to the right and plays ending in odd numbers went to the left. Billy ran wherever he thought he saw an opening. Thus, on fullback calls an opponent had to be blocked straight up in the air. Billy was a big, tough kid and the only time I ever saw him slowed was the Friday night he swallowed his entire plug of chewing tobacco. I am not putting Billy down. He was a great guy and I would rather have him by my side on a trek across Africa or in a street fight than any number of world famous scholars I could name.

You can admire the Billys of this world, as I do, but your role on the team is different. You are not the owner; you are not even the coach, but you call a lot of the signals. The depth of your Biblical insight, the range of your historical understanding, the precision of your systematic acuity, and your ability to apply what you know to the upbuilding of God's kingdom are all crucial to the company of the faithful.

You will not fail to observe that in exposition of paideia I have described your charisma – briefly put: transmission on the way to transformation. I have a behavioral objective for this part of the sermon. On the May 27, 2010 I would like you to phone the classmate on your right and on your left and ask how their paideia is going.

## II.

Picking up the second theme of your master's baccalaureate, we all stand under the mandate: "As each has received a gift, employ it for one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace." Obviously each of you is included in the "each" who has received a gift of God's grace. However, a concentration on your great gifts is an invitation to disaster – a giant step toward pride, which, according to Dante, is the deadliest of the seven deadly sins.

God has not called you into the ministry of the Word to please you but to use you. It is pleasing to agree with Herman Melville, "The pulpit is ever this earth's foremost part; all the rest comes behind. History is a ship on its passage out and the pulpit is its prow." Martin Luther thought the preaching office to be the work of the Holy Spirit. There is, he said, "nothing more precious or nobler on earth and in this life than a true servant of God"" None of us are worthy, but those who ascend the pulpit carelessly stand under John Milton's famous and savage catachresis: "Blind mouths, the hungry sheep look up and are not fed/ But swol'n with wind and the rank mist they draw/ Rot inwardly and foul contagion spreads." You do not want to be a blind mouth.

If you ministers of the Word have learned anything, it is that you are not the Word. Moreover, you do not have the Word – the living Word of God has you. Not what, not why, not how, not where, not when but who you preach is the only question and the answer is simple.

"I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2).

Individualism is one of the megatrends of our society. In one way or another each of us will be dogged by seeing I-trouble all our lives. I think therefore I am is not the program. A blind I is no improvement on a blind mouth. I serve therefore I think is better. Of course you need to

be warned about subtle forms of self-absorption and self-deception, but not by me and not today. I want to remind you not of the splendor of your gifts but of their purpose. You have received a gift in order to employ it for one another. Charisma has a communal direction; it is for God's glory not your glorification.

We have come together in these seminary years from many different directions, bearing many different gifts which have enriched our community. Not all of them are academic. In fact, one of the students dearest to me had a terrible time in my classes.

But when asked for the first commandment our Lord said, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.'" He added the mind in citing Deuteronomy 10:13. The mind does not stand alone, but it is included in the first commandment. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel was not often right but he was correct when he said, "Denken ist auch Gottesdienst" – thinking is also worship of God.

It is certainly true that you can be a good and faithful pastor, loving and serving God's people with only the most minimal acquaintance with the classics of Christian faith. You might even become a saint and the Kingdom of God needs saints, but it also needs teachers – like Chaucer's Clerk of Oxenford "And gladly would he learn, and gladly teach." That God has made foolish the wisdom of the world means the Church's leaders should have more insight – not less than the wise ones of the world. Ministers, like thumb tacks, go into things no deeper than their head allows. Our life is hid in Christ, whom God made our wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption (1 Corinthians 1:25).

Some of you are like my friend, Billy, the fullback. You will carry the ball your own way with no game plan at all. Indeed, you may often find yourself running in a broken field without

teammates in position to throw a block for you. And with opponents who will knock your head off, if they can. Still, for a minister to reject the title “theologian” is like a physician refusing to be called “medical.” In every place that “theology matters” there will be need for intellectual leadership, a creative ability to handle the ideas of those who have shaped the thought world in which you and your people live.

Even in the midst of wildly popular dumbing-down supported by indigenous American anti-intellectualism, you dare not choke the life from so great a gift and offer to Almighty God mind-less service.

You knew he would be cited sooner or later, but he comes latest. Commenting on your gift to be employed for one another, a very good pastor and theologian named John Calvin says to the master’s class of 2009 at their baccalaureate:

“Those whom God calls to the Ministry of the Word are called to a life of first rate scholarship.”

Blessings to you and to Our Lord be all glory, all honor, all praise.

Amen.