

C is for *Commencement*

I like to think we are more about commencing than graduating. Commencement connotes a start and a new beginning. Graduation connotes the completion of studies.

There may come a day when we can close the books, including the book on our own lives; but that may not be anything to cheer about. The New Testament speaks more of the final days as a time of books being opened, with names (yours and mine) included as connected to the Lamb of God.

Because of that bright and glorious future that we share, we commence. Yet we commence as those tied to our roots in the Lamb of God. What does that kind of commencing mean?

For one thing, it means freedom. That's what a wise prof once lifted up, as a commencement speaker almost forty years ago, at an institution that I had the privilege also of attending (though not at the time of this address). The time was June, 1968, and the place was Concordia Senior College in Fort Wayne, Indiana. The student body was all male, which explains the references to men in the speech. The place no longer exists as such; and that's a shame, because it was one of the finest educational institutions in the country, with some of the best professors in a wide variety of liberal arts. It was tragically closed during the "time for confessing" years in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod in the 1970's. The explanation was given by the LC-MS at the time that it was not cost effective. Some, like me, would con-



Commencement 2006 (Pictured here at Valparaiso University)

tend that the real reason for the closing of CSC was that a sizeable number of those who earned their Bachelor's degree there went on to Seminex. I was one of those. Freedom, I came to learn and to believe, especially the freedom that comes from the Lamb of God, is empowering. It empowers commencing, new starts, new beginnings.

But let's learn it again (and believe it again) in the hearing of the commencement address: "The Twice-Free Student" by Robert W. Bertram.

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There is freedom and there is freedom. There is freedom with a small f and freedom with a capital F. Both freedoms are yours. You are twice free. Of both freedoms we can say, though not in the same way, three things: freedom is a hard-bought thing, freedom is a responsibility, freedom is a mirror.

First, freedom (freedom with a small "f") is a hard-bought thing. How hard is it for people to buy their freedom? I had a student who had come to us from the brave country of Hungary. He had been one of the Freedom Fighters who in those dark days on the streets of Budapest had fought a losing battle, with

sticks and stones, against the Soviet tanks. And now for awhile he had left behind the homeland, the beloved country, but only until that opportune day when he could return and rejoin the cause for freedom.

Freedom is a hard-bought thing. In 1776 when Richard Henry Lee stood before the Continental Congress and proposed that the colonies assert their independence from the fatherland he loved, he had already counted what this would cost in the bloodshed of his fellow Virginians. Moreover, his blood brother was still an alderman in London and his own two sons were away at school in England.

Freedom is a hard-bought thing, also for you as students. In its quieter agonies on every thinking campus throughout today's world, the fight for student freedom is a costly one. You too must be experiencing, at first hand, how students can win their freedom at only a very high price.

For even such conventional freedoms as the freedom from compulsory class attendance, freedom to help shape the curriculum, freedom to choose your own seminary or your own pre-seminary college, freedom to raise a beard (you'll notice I don't have one myself), freedom to marry a wife, to own a car, to incur debts, just think of the exorbitant cost which even such freedoms entail: the cost in negotiations between students and administration, the cost in man-hours in faculty curriculum committees—not to mention the higher cost of impatience, generations-gap, misunderstanding, demoralization. Freedom is a hard-bought thing.

***R** is for Responsibility*

Freedom is a responsibility. Liberty, as we Americans will again remind one another on the fourth of next month, is our "inalienable right." But it is more than that. It is a responsibility. To be free is my obligation. I don't mean only that freedom **imposes** responsibility. That is self-evident. What I mean is that men have a responsibility to **be** free. It is one of the ground rules of a democracy that no citizen may sell himself into slavery. One thing men are not free to do: They are not free to forfeit their freedom. Not even by majority vote. The governments of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy were both voted into

power by sizable majorities in their popular elections. This did not make them free nations. Can a democratic people, by popular vote, repeal the popular vote? If so, what they repeal is not merely a right but a responsibility. Do we have a right to be free? We have no right not to be free.

Freedom is our responsibility. There are some things in life which I have to be left free to do myself and which neither you nor anyone may do for me. I have to do my own eating and drinking. I have to do my own dying. These you cannot do for me.

I have to do my own loving--loving my God, my fellowmen. You may love them, too, but that would be **your** love for them, not **mine**. You may not relieve me of that responsibility. I have to be free to do my own thinking. You may advise me, but it is I finally who must make my decisions if I am to be held responsible for them. I may be a member of an oppressed people--say, a disinherited American citizen or an overrun foreigner--and you may be willing to fight for my freedom. But you are not free to take my responsibility for me, my own responsibility to be free, free even from you. I am responsible for that freedom, responsible to Someone greater than both of us.

Freedom is your responsibility, also as students. Student freedom is not only your right. It is your duty, frankly, whether you desire it or not. Just which freedoms in particular you ought to have may be an open question. Such questions are still negotiable. But this much, now already, is sure: If as students you are being retarded, stunted, in your shouldering of your responsibilities, then to that extent you are not as free as you ought to be--as you ought to be, as you are obligated to be, not merely as you have a right to be.

For example, there may be daily roll-calls to check your class-attendance, pop-quizzes to motivate your homework, a prescribed curriculum to protect you against your own bad choices, acres of real estate to insure your environment, a likeminded peer group all moving on the same vocational track, a synodical "system" providing you an eight-year planned society. Are these conditions debilitating? Not necessarily. They might even be liberating. But if these conditions were to disable you from accepting your own responsibilities--especially in view of the profession

you are entering, which gives you more responsible freedom than any other profession does--and if conditions like these were still retarding your responsibility as seminarians in professional school, perhaps with wives and families of your own, then those conditions, to put it modestly, would be depriving you of a freedom you ought to have, a freedom you not merely have a right to have but are obligated to have. Freedom, also student freedom, is your responsibility.



Robert Bertram (right) enjoying a break at a Crossings board meeting with President Steve Kuhl (left), and Secretary Cathy Lessmann, June 2001.

O is for *Options (even as prodigals)*

Freedom is a mirror. Freedom can show me up for what I am. Leave me free to face my responsibilities, and I have to face up to myself. The ten-year old boy insists to his father, "At my age I should be free to start smoking." His father reasons with him, but with no success. Finally he says to the boy, "All right, son, you're free to try it." When the boy does and, in the process, turns green and everything around him begins to spin, the boy has learned something about smoking, about ten-year-olds, about himself. His freedom was a mirror.

The prodigal son asked for his inheritance and for the freedom to set out on his own. Reluctantly his father gave him that freedom. Later, when the son sat penniless and defeated among the husks in the far country, he had made a discovery, "Father, I am not worthy to be called your son."

Freedom is a mirror. When I insist on bearing my responsibilities, as indeed I must, I also have to bear the consequences and face the truth about myself--whoever I may be. I may be the American business community, free to take responsibility for the national "inheritance." But suppose that in my freedom--though I'm never convinced I have enough of it—I nevertheless become prodigal and waste the nation's substance, pollute its air and its water, give only token consideration to its unemployables, and exploit its consumers. Then my freedom, the freedom of American business, only mirrors my unworthiness to be free.

I may be The American Family, free to take responsibility for my family members. But suppose that in this freedom I mortgage myself to death on creature comfort yet begrudge the cost of my youngsters' and other peoples' youngsters' education. Suppose what I show these youngsters of married life forever ruins their respect for it. Suppose I abandon their spiritual care to a Sunday School and their grandparents to loneliness and a little Medicare. Then my freedom, the freedom of the American family, only mirrors my unworthiness to be free.

I may be The American Student, liberated more and more from the old restrictions of curriculum and grading system and campus discipline, free more and more to take responsibility for my own education. But suppose that in my new freedom I flunk my courses or just squeak by with the barest minimum, find it increasingly difficult to get myself to classes anymore and increasingly tempting to blame my uninteresting teachers--as though I were really that dependent upon my teachers.

Worse yet, suppose that in my new freedom it suddenly becomes clear how little responsibility I accept for my delinquent fellow students, how little responsibility for getting them to class or helping them to excel, and how little responsibility we students all accept for our own mutual discipline and encouragement, as students.

Then see what the mirror of my student freedom reflects. It reflects not only that I've done poorly in a course, not only that I may have to spend an extra semester in seminary, not only that my financial aid will

be reduced, not only that the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to read this book or hear that lecture is forever forfeited, not only that the student brotherhood has been deprived of my help. No, the worst of it is, my student freedom then mirrors my unworthiness to be free.

Yes, freedom is a mirror, an accusing mirror. It is the mirror of the divine judgment. The more freedom we have, the more it incriminates us. But it's the same even when people hesitate to trust us with freedom. Whether their distrust is justified or not, their restrictions upon us are implicit judgments upon us. And not only **their** judgments. Their judgments in turn mirror the judgment by God. And that his judgment is justified there can be no doubt.

That, finally, is why freedom is so costly. It costs us every last pretense about our own importance. It exacts from us the ultimate confession, that we cannot justify the freedom we have. No wonder so many among us, also so many students, cop-out on the drive for freedom. It isn't worth the effort, they alibi. But that isn't all it isn't worth, namely, the "effort." Perhaps what they really mean is, it isn't worth the painful truth which freedom uncovers about ourselves.

No wonder so many among us, also so many students who do stomp for freedom, are those who kid themselves about their ability to handle it. They haven't counted the real cost in self-honesty. Still, as we also said, we have no right to run away from our freedom, as mortifying as it finally is, and as it is meant to be. We have no right not to be free, no right to evade that ultimate exposure.

From that dilemma there is no buying our own way out. Freedom is a hard-bought thing, freedom is a responsibility, freedom is a mirror.

Conference CDs available!

*If you were one of the unfortunates who couldn't attend the **Honest-to-God Crossings Conference** last January, you may purchase a CD of the proceedings for a mere \$25 by writing or emailing your request to Cathy Lessmann in the Crossings office (clessmann@charter.net).*

SS is for Saving Students

(and everyone else)

That, alas, is freedom with a small f. But there is also freedom with a capital F. You are twice free. So now let us say it all over again quickly another way--that Way which is Jesus our Lord.

Freedom is a hard-bought thing. Your freedom, "you," says the apostle, "were brought with a price," and that Price is Jesus Christ. You were "purchased with His own blood." To rescue us from exile in the far country of our sin and our rejectedness, he left behind the beloved country, the family circle of the heavenly Father, having counted in advance the cost of bloodshed and parental rejection, and he suffered our forsakenness. He cried our cry, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" But for this price, which he did not begrudge, we are free to return, beyond the forsakenness to the forgiveness of the waiting Father. This "Freedom Fighter," Jesus Christ, fought for us with stick and stone--a stick of a cross and a stone rolled from a tomb. But though he lost his life, it was no losing battle. He bought for us our freedom.

Freedom is a hard-bought thing. But because it has been bought the hard way by Jesus our Lord, you won't need to buy your own freedom that way, also not your academic freedom. I don't mean by that that those students who are Christians and have been liberated by Christ ought therefore to get their academic freedom cheap, at some sort of clergy discount. Our Lord did not die for men to be goof-offs. Christian freedom is not permissiveness and coddling. Church membership does not exempt students from doing their homework or from taking the consequences when they slip. If anything, it liberates them **to** take the consequences with good courage.

But that isn't all that our Lord's hard-bought liberation liberates us for, namely, for the courage to face the music of our own failings. Oh, no. It also liberates us from failing in the first place. It really does, as those of you who believe that have discovered. Take the threat out of freedom, and men who otherwise would dread that freedom might now instead be glad to try their hand at it, be glad to live up to it, be glad to take on one new freedom after the other.

When you take the threat out of freedom the way our Lord has done, by his taking our threat unto himself, it does not follow that his beneficiaries will necessarily abuse their new freedom. They might. That is a risk. But they might also take their new freedom in stride, and prove in the process that they can handle it. If so, they are then free not merely to accept their F's like men, with stiff upper-lip, but more than that: free to expect excellence of themselves and actually to enjoy it. Don't be surprised when students with that kind of confidence--confidence in the hard-bought freedom Christ won for them--appear at the dean's office one morning with a request for some bold new student freedom. They might just have rather impressive backing.

I is for Interference

Freedom we said, is **our** responsibility. Let us say now, "Our freedom is **Christ's** responsibility." For liberating us, who were not only bound but guilty, he took the blame. If I walked into the Allen County jail and took it upon myself to turn the prisoners loose, I of course would be held responsible for this audacious interference. Christ in his audacious mercy walked into our off-limits world and took it upon himself, the Holy One of God, to fraternize with us, the enemy, and to set us free. For this he bore the responsibility, bore it all the way to the death, bore it away.

Our freedom is Christ's responsibility. Because it is, we in turn are free to be responsible for every other weary slave. No one who enjoys the liberty of Christ sits idly by, irresponsibly observing the slavery of others. Christ's church is no observatory, no womb-with-a-window. Wherever men are bound, in whatever ghetto—whether in the inner-city or perhaps on our own campus—whether east of the Iron Curtain or west of it; wherever men are silenced by bigotry, the cruel bigotry of militant prejudice or of bleeding-heart sentimentality or of quietistic silence; wherever men are terrorized, whether by starvation and rats, by napalm, by a mushroom cloud, by cancer, by the truth about themselves—there is the church's urgent and happy responsibility: to cheer men on to their freedom, or to love them into their freedom, or to spend oneself for their freedom.



Our freedom is Christ's responsibility. Because it is, you too are free to be responsible for one another—for one another as students, as scholars and learners. You need not restrict that responsibility to your fellow-student's courtship problems or to his emotional problems, to his (as we say) "personal" problems. Even with such prosaic problems as the boredom he suffers in course number-so-and-so or the fatalism he brings to tomorrow's exams you are now free to help shoulder his burden. "He's not heavy, Father, he's my brother." No longer need you say, about his disinterest in history or science or his aversion to ideas, that is none of your business. **He** is your business, as you are Christ's. That, thank the Lord, is how free you now are. Only a few weeks ago a student told me he would never have gotten so wrapped up in his term-paper if it hadn't been for the interest shown in it by an upper-classman across the hall. For the freedom of one another you are now free to be responsible.

NG is for Now, Go!

(that is, commence, Freely!)

Freedom is a mirror. It may be an accusing mirror, reflecting our unworthiness of it. This freedom scares us off. But now Christ steps before the mirror, between it and us. He makes the mirror reflect not us but himself as our Go-between. Now we are free from the way we used to look, free to look like him. Gone are the old wrinkles of discouragement, the shadowlines of guilt, the slouch of defeat. Instead the mirror, the divine evaluation, shows us looking quite as good and alive as Jesus himself. He, the New Testament says, is the very likeness of the Father, the express image of the Godhead. We had been orphaned from that Father, and we looked it. But now our Father, seeing us as Christ, exclaims, "My, how you resemble me, how much you look like my own darling youngsters—the very spit and image of your Father." This new look is the "glorious liberty of the sons of God."

Freedom is a mirror. In the Father's eyes we have the look of Christ about us. But not only in our Father's eyes. Also in the eyes of one another. As more and more we associate with Christ—as in the church's

preaching we listen not for the preacher but for Christ, as in the company of one another we divine the companionship of Christ—so more and more he begins to grow on us. You have known some happily married couple who through their life together have come to think alike, talk alike, and even look alike. So it can be with us and our Husband, Christ. I say this not only to those of you who already have learned to enjoy this happy union with him but to those of you as well who are trying to make it alone. The freedom of being independent is nothing like the freedom of being mated with him. And it shows. One of you, seated here this afternoon, once said to me: A saint is a man who makes it a little easier to believe in God. You not only said that to me. You showed it to me, you and your wife, to my own eyes.

As you, my students--and that, poor you, is what you will soon literally be: my students--as you grow to think and love with “the mind of Christ,” and thrive on His Spirit, there is no hard-nosed professor tough enough to intimidate you, no seminary that can contain you, no system--synodical or otherwise--that can restrict you, no accusing mirror that can embitter or depress you, at least not unto death. Whatever oppressors you may encounter had better watch out for you, for what they will see in you--and they jolly well may recognize him--is the liberating Christ. They had better watch out, for you may just captivate them as he did you, by loving them and helping them to live. There, in the Christ whom you can mirror, is the freedom for this world, and not for this world alone.

Robert W. Bertram

S is for Solace

In this time when many are commencing from academic institutions, there are some who will not be commencing—or at best, commencing only *in memoriam*.

I’m thinking particularly of those who were massacred at Virginia Tech University a month ago from this writing. I’m thinking also of the poor, tormented, possessed slayer whose body is also found among the thirty-three. For them, their families, their friends, their loved ones, I offer solace—and the only solace I know to offer that is trustworthy and true:

Jesus the Christ, the risen Lord, He who makes all our commencing truly new starts, new beginnings.

Let us not underestimate (as most memorializers of that day regrettably did) the nature of what all it is that the risen Jesus the Christ truly does for us. He frees us from the bondage and captivity to our sin. Those bonds that hold us tight, that don’t let us breathe, that lead us to despair, are broken, even as they were for Jesus on Easter morning. They lie empty, harmless, in the tomb.

His tomb is the truth of our own death—the truth that we are all a people cut off from the land of the living, under the judgment of death. All of us, not only those who died at VTU that day, but all of us, are linked to the tomb from which Jesus rose. It doesn’t erase the pain of losing these loved ones, or the spirit of emptiness that comes from such a demonic massacre, but it does put it in perspective. Death, whenever it happens, however it happens, calls us to penitence for how estranged we all are from the life that God created and intended for us all.

Yet there is a new Spirit that blows, a Spirit of solace, of comfort, of peace. It is the Spirit of the living God at Pentecost, the promised Spirit from the promising risen One, Jesus the Christ. Over all judgment, over all death, there is a crushing of this condemnation under the feet of the risen One. There is a joining-together of dry bones and a refleshing that comes into being through the fullness of newness that God recreates in this risen One. Those who once were dead are made alive. Death itself is swallowed up in victory.

For all who are dead, even in spirit worn and empty and despairing, Easter comes! Pentecost comes! A new Spirit is blowing across this land. Do you not perceive it?! It comes with hope, and joy, and promise.

We are all memorialized, re-membered, strengthened to commence again, even more boldly than before. You are that free!

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Printing and mailing this quarterly is paid for by your gifts, thank you. If you are a reader but not yet a giver, we can wait. When you are ready to be both, we won’t object.