

**CENTRAL BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
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“AMBASSADORS FOR CHRIST WITH DIPLOMATIC VULNERABILITY”

TEXT: 2 Corinthians 5.16-21

Dr. Marshall, Members of the Board, Faculty, Graduates, Students and gathered family members and friends, I greet you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. I thank Dr. Marshall and the Members of the Board of Central Baptist Theological Seminary for conferring upon me this Doctor of Divinity *honoris causa*.

You have ruined one of my best jokes. I've been introduced more times than I can count as Dr. Buttry, so I'd often begin my remarks by thanking people for conferring an honorary doctorate upon me. I've just said that same line, but this time it is no joke. For that I'm thankful, but I'll have to find some other humorous line with which to begin in the future. So thank you for complicating my life in this generous and humbling fashion.

Thirty years ago this month my father in life and my father in ministry, Rev. Lucas W. Buttry, graduated into heavenly glory. I graduated from Wheaton College *summa cum laude*, but my Dad liked to say that he graduated from Wheaton *O Laude*. I feel today that I have received my Doctor of Divinity from Central, *O Laude*! It is a testament to the grace of the Lord God to me through many years, through many mistakes, through the support of many people, including and especially my wife, my children, my mother, my father, my siblings, my professors and Sunday School teachers, my patient and loving church members, my ministry and missionary colleagues.

None of us gets to where we are in ministry on our own. It is all by grace. The grace of God. The grace of other people. Hard work is there, oh, yes. Skill and preparation are there, oh, yes. But it is all shot through and sustained and energized and enabled and brought to fruition through grace, amazing grace.

And I think I speak not just to this gathered congregation but on behalf of all the graduates this day. We thank you, we thank you all.

For the last six years I have served as a Global Consultant, actually Missionary, for Peace and Justice for International Ministries of the American Baptist Churches USA. Or more simply, I have been an Ambassador for Christ. You graduates may have different job titles when you leave here. Some will be pastor, some assistant pastor, some youth minister, some program director, some missionary, some who knows what. But you will all bear the title Ambassador for Christ.

When I leave my home to go to some far-off destination to represent the Lord Jesus

Christ, I have to take a passport. It's not a diplomatic passport because as of yet Jesus isn't recognized by the nations as King of kings and Lord of lords. My credentials as Ambassador for Christ don't count yet at immigration. So I have to bring my U.S. passport.

When I enter another country, often I have to have a visa giving me the permission to come for a limited amount of time. So this passport is a record of my travels, with visa stickers and stamps from various countries.

I'd like to take you through the passport with some stories reflected in these pages that may speak about the Kingdom, or the Realm, or the Commonwealth which we represent as Ambassadors for Christ. These stories speak to issues I found in these various countries, but they also speak to issues you will face in the places where you will be called to serve as Ambassadors for Christ as well. These stories speak to the values we need to represent as we stand for Christ at our various duty stations.

First, what do we value as Ambassadors for Christ? We value freedom. When Jesus preached his first sermon in Nazareth he used as his text the great freedom passage from Isaiah 61:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
And recovery of sight to the blind,
To let the oppressed go free,
To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”
(Luke 4.18,19)

This is the freedom agenda of the one who sends us out, the one whose reign we represent.

So as Ambassadors for Christ we become advocates for fleshing out that freedom agenda.

Here's one of my many visas to India. [picture shown of visa]

That's one place where the issue of freedom has been paramount, particularly religious freedom and the question of how we deal with religious diversity in our day and age.

Last year and this year I've been involved with Christians in the state of Orissa, just to the south west of Calcutta. On Christmas day 2007 Hindu militants launched coordinated attacks in many villages across the Kandhamal District of Orissa. First the armed militants tore down village gates that had been decorated with Christian symbols. Then they entered the churches while services were being held. People were beaten. Bibles were shredded One pastor was hacked to death in front of his congregation. Over the next three days 95 churches were looted and burned. Bones of the dead were burned on altars.

Some 500 houses were burned as well as Christian-owned business. Thousands of people fled into forest.

These Hindu militants believe all Indians should be Hindus, and they have attacked Muslims and Sikhs as well as Christians. There is a national political party connected to the militants, which controls the state government in Orissa. They have done little to stop the violence, and have made the situation even more oppressive for the victims, such as blocking outside relief and demanding that Christians convert to Hinduism to receive aid.

In January and then again in April of last year I traveled to Orissa to facilitate trainings in conflict resolution, trauma recovery and nonviolence. I tried to work with the pastors and church leaders, some of them still living in the forest, on how to respond with love not violence to those who have persecuted them.

Their pain was evident, but I was also struck by their faith and especially their even-handed view of the Hindus around them. They told of the attacks on them by the Hindu militants, but they also told about the Hindu neighbors who took them in or who were severely beaten when they put their bodies between the Christians and the Hindu attackers. Even as their homes and churches still smelled of the charring of the fires they knew that Hinduism wasn't the problem but rather hatred.

At the center of the hatred was a radical swami calling for expulsion of all Christians from Orissa. He got on the radio and railed against Christians. He used what we call "hate speech," calling for destruction and murder. This past August the Swami was assassinated, not by Christians, but by Maoist rebels. But in their outrage Hindu militants attacked Christians again. Hundreds of churches were burned. More homes were destroyed, and more people were slaughtered. The persecution and the violence continues. I've been invited back to Orissa to do more training, which we hope to do before too long.

It was out of the fires of persecution in England and Puritan Massachusetts that Baptists developed a deep passion for freedom, including and especially religious liberty. Thomas Helyws died in prison under King James' persecution of religious dissenters. John Bunyan penned *A Pilgrim's Progress* from a jail cell and spent more than 12 years in prison. Roger Williams was exiled from Massachusetts upon penalty of death, and then founded Rhode Island with religious liberty as a founding principle.

Baptists have long stood for religious liberty, not just for us, but for all people. So when we hear about the persecution of Christians in India, we cry out for religious freedom. Freedom is a value in our blood and bones, in our Baptist DNA. It's terrible what the Hindu militants have done.

But, be careful! Jesus warned us not to judge lest we be judged. We need to remove the beam in our own eye before we remove the splinter in our neighbor's eye. There are Christians in the US spewing hate speech that is very close to what the swami in Orissa was saying.

Christian radio program, nationally syndicated—calling for all Muslims to leave US. This Christian talk-show host went on a long anti-Muslim rant: “I won’t have my daughter wearing a burka!” There it was: Hate speech on Christian radio, not against us, not against our community, but hate speech by our community.

You may not be Christ’s Ambassador to India. You may be Christ’s Ambassador to a placement in the United States. You will need to stand for freedom for all, particularly in the context of religious diversity. There will be plenty of opportunities to confront the issue of prejudice, fear and even hatred towards people of other faiths. Those moments may be presented by people in your own congregations. They will come to you with appeals to sign this petition or join that campaign based on hate and fear and with little or no truth to them.

Stand for freedom for all, a freedom that is based on respect for the human dignity for all people because all people have God’s image indelibly stamped upon them. And we call people to Christ with a free conscience—no coercion of political might or spiritual manipulation.

One of our great Baptist fore-bearers was John Leland. He was the primary person who got religious liberty in the U.S. Constitution. John Leland did not call for a Judeo-Christian nation that excluded others—that wanted to drive out Muslims, or Hindus, or whoever. Rather he wrote back in the late 1700s:

“The liberty I contend for is more than toleration. The very idea of toleration is despicable; it supposes that some have a pre-eminence above the rest to grant indulgence, whereas all should be equally free, Jews, Turks, Pagans and Christians.”

Even back as our nation was being founded there was an Ambassador for Christ making a stand for freedom, for religious liberty that embraced Muslims as well as Christians and Jews. Leland was an evangelist, too. He called people to faith in Christ. But that faith needs to be born in freedom. It is born in love that sets free not in compulsion. We need that witness for freedom in India, and we need it right here in the U.S. today. Part of your job as Ambassadors for Christ is to make that witness.

Second, whom do we value as Ambassadors for Christ? We value everyone—we are to love everyone, yes—but most especially as Ambassadors for Christ we are to value the “least of these.”

Here’s the visa for Ethiopia. [picture shown of visa] I’ve been there three times, but going with my wife Sharon in October of 2006 was very special. We encountered again and again the street children of Addis Ababa. There are over 100,000 of them, many of them AIDS orphans. I’ll never forget walking back from our dinner at a restaurant near our hotel and seeing a tiny pile of rags against the wall. A closer look showed two little children, perhaps 3 or 4 years old, sleeping on the sidewalk, all curled up against the cold.

Each morning we would take what food we could gather at breakfast to share with these children.

Gulele Baptist Church is a special place in Addis, pastored by Abejehu Damene. His wife Aklila is a social worker. Together Abejehu and Aklila have launched a ministry to the street children, many of whom can be found right outside the gate of their church compound. Sharon and I have adopted their street children ministry, providing support for regular outreach, for feeding and special events.

But you don't have to go to Addis Ababa to find lost children. There are lost children wherever God will call you. When I was in seminary we saw one such child in the town of Ipswich where we lived and where I did my internship at the First Baptist Church. Patty had Down's Syndrome, and her parents were alcoholics. She lived in one of the dingy apartments above the downtown stores, and she used to run wild in the streets, unable to talk, stealing whatever pleased her eyes in the stores, and always getting caught.

One couple in the church reached out to Patty and started bringing her to Sunday services. Patty was wild and out of control, but the whole church took her on as one of Christ's little ones, one of the least of these whom we are to love, and in so loving we love Christ.

It wasn't easy. She could be disruptive, but rather than scold her, someone would always come alongside and show her the proper way to act. She was taught how to read, especially how to read the Bible. Soon Patty was the first person at church every Sunday, sitting on the steps to greet whomever came next. The church was her home, the place where she had discovered love.

She accepted Christ whom she had encountered in so many people and was baptized. She entered into the regular youth group and bloomed in amazing ways. She became a loving missionary in that town—an amazing young woman the last time I'd seen her.

Patty's flourishing was all because a church valued the ones Christ values, the least of these. So as you go to your ambassadorial assignment, will you be representing Christ by valuing these little ones, whether they are children, or lost, lonely, questioning, questing, hopeless, hounded, broken or bowed-down adults? They are the ones you will find at the margins. These are the ones you must value—hold them dear. They are the lost sheep the Good Shepherd seeks.

Sharon and I found them on the streets of Addis Ababa in Ethiopia. You may have to go out and find them in the communities where you represent Christ. Or they may barge in on you and interrupt your plans.

You don't have diplomatic immunity as an Ambassador for Christ. You aren't protected from the pains and troubles of the world. Rather you have diplomatic vulnerability. We are called to have open hearts to be touched by the sorrows and injustices around us.

We are called to be vulnerable, to be hurt and to be pained by the hurts and pains that others bear. That's how we bear the cross of Christ. That's how we take the love of Christ to those who need him. The least of these—are the ones you must value highly. That's part of your mission as Ambassadors for Christ.

Third, how do we present ourselves as Ambassadors for Christ? What is the spirit we value in our approach?

Last month President and Mrs. Obama traveled to Europe in their first visit to that region as official representatives of the United States. There was a bit of humorous controversy about Michelle Obama and how she put her arm around the Queen of England. That was a manner of approach that was very American, but a bit too informal for Her Majesty! Too chummy! The press had a grand time with this, and the Queen and First Lady handled it well.

But ambassadors must be careful of how they present themselves. We as Ambassadors for Christ present ourselves to others in the Spirit of the One who gave himself for us. Our value in our approach is to be completely and transformatively given over to the Holy Spirit.

Ah, here's my visa for Georgia. [picture of visa shown] Not the state of Georgia, but the Republic of Georgia just south of Russia. It used to be part of the Soviet Union.

The Baptists in Georgia are some of the most amazing Christians I've found anywhere with any label. They are completely given over to the Spirit of God, as much as anyone I've ever met. They are engaged in a wonderful renewal of worship that is enacted and experienced amid life in the world around them. The Baptists there have been going through what they call "reforms" in which they have sought to contextualize the gospel and the life of the church in Georgian culture. They are a tiny community but with a big spirit and bold public witness.

Four years ago I spent Holy Week in Georgia, one of the greatest experiences of my life. I experienced how they live out these reforms and their witness for Christ. Holy Week began on Palm Sunday when I joined in a two-hour palm-waving procession through Tbilisi from their administrative and conference facility on the edge of the city to Central Baptist Church downtown. People would cross themselves as we passed by, and hundreds if not thousands saw our witness to Christ on the streets.

But that was just warming up. We had another procession on Good Friday--four hours this time. I joined in carrying a heavy cross on a winding route through the city with stops for short liturgies at the Catholic Church, the Armenian Apostolic Church, and the Lutheran Church. We concluded our procession at the Baptist Church which we entered for a profound service of worship.

Between those processions and services I shared in Passover with the Jewish community led by the Chief Rabbi of Tbilisi and two Maundy Thursday services, one more traditional and the other very dramatic and artistic including a foot-washing ceremony.

As you know Holy Week culminates at Easter. We started the Easter vigil at 11 p.m. Saturday night, and the service went all through the night until the wee hours of the morning. Here in the US it's hard to find a genuine sunrise service anymore. We are so lazy and too bothered to celebrate the resurrection of Christ outside of our normal routines—it's pathetic! But these Georgian Baptists never went to bed. The 4 ½ -hour service included a processional, a couple sermons (one by me), a baptism of 22 people, the Eucharist, the reading of all the resurrection appearances in all the gospels, litanies, liturgical dance, beautiful music, a recessional to knock open the doors of the church and then pray for the world. Following the worship service we had a music festival and youth drama.

Then at about 5 am, we piled in cars and three city buses to caravan up to the mountainside overlooking Tbilisi, waving their Baptist flags and honking horns. When we got to the mountain, the wind was wild and cold, but bonfires were going.

We danced to a folk trio and drank wine together. My old Baptist forebears would have been mortified, but this is very Georgian!—the Caucasus Mountain culture baptized in the Holy Spirit.

We ate breakfast as the sun came up, and then worshipped on the mountain in the new light of day with prayer and song and blessings. I've never been so moved by the rituals of Holy Week as I was in Georgia—the sorrow, the joy, the witness to the world about a crucified and risen Lord. Every service was standing-room-only with a love and excitement that was drawing new people to faith even when the Baptists in Georgia have been suffering under harassment and sometimes violence for their faith.

These people know the Spirit of Jesus among them. Their worship pulses with the dynamism of the living God. They can't be contained in the walls of their sanctuary, but they spill out into the streets and mountainsides. The city knows they are there.

The worship of the Georgian Baptists spilled up into the mountains in a very different way earlier. It was Advent, and the congregation was preparing for their big Christmas feast, making food, saving money. Georgians know how to throw a party, and this was going to be a holy hum-dinger.

But there was a war going on just across the border in Russia. The Chechens wanted to break away from Russia and launched a rebellion.

The Russian army went into Chechnya with brutal force. The Chechen capital of Grozny was reduced to rubble by artillery and bombs. Tens of thousands of refugees fled into the mountains across the border into Georgia.

Now you need to know that Georgians hate Chechens. Centuries ago Chechen raiders would come into Georgia to kidnap children and sell them in the slave markets of Turkey. So for centuries Georgian parents have warned their misbehaving kids, “You better obey or the Chechens will get you!” Furthermore, Chechens are Muslims, and most Georgians are Christians. So these Chechens are the enemy, people you hate finally getting their just reward, finally facing God’s judgment.

But in a worship service an old woman, a dear sister in the church, stood up and spoke about the plight of the Chechen refugees. She quoted the Apostle Paul, “If your enemy is hungry....” [time was allowed for those to respond.. “feed them.”] (Very good, I see you passed your New Testament courses!) This woman said, in church, “Let’s cancel our Christmas dinner and take our feast into the mountains and feed the Chechens.”

That’s not a woman talking, that’s the Holy Spirit, the same Holy Spirit that ignites our worship. This Holy Spirit ignites our service, even service that sends us out to love our enemies.

So the Georgian Baptists canceled their Christmas feast and went into the mountains. They found their suffering enemies and fed them. The Georgian Baptists cared for the Chechen refugees for a couple of years. Later the Chechen imam said, “When I get back to Grozny I’m going to do two things: Build a new mosque, because the Russians destroyed ours. And build a Baptist church, because the Baptists were the only ones with us in our hour of need.”

As Ambassadors for Christ we take on our mission through the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the one, Jesus the Christ, who gave himself for us. So we give ourselves in service in the world. But that service erupts out of a life of worship where we are filled with the Spirit. And our worship, if it is truly in the Spirit, has to spill into the world, into our places of need and pain and hopelessness.

You won’t love your enemies for long unless you have a deeper love within you, a love that flowed originally from the cross of Jesus. You won’t sustain service to those who are desperately needy and broken unless you have a deeper well of compassion to draw upon than what is in your own heart, a well of compassion that goes deep into the heart of the God who so loved the world that he sent Jesus.

And your worship will become insipid and trite if it does not engage the world around you. You might put on a fine show, but you won’t have the Spirit if you just stay in your safe building. Genuine Spirit-filled worship compels you into loving action in the world.

We need to contextualize the gospel, not duplicating what they do in Georgia, but taking on the same task in our own context. What does the Spirit call us to do in Kansas City, in Missouri, in Oklahoma, in Kansas and Colorado?

You are Ambassadors for Christ. So as they say down in the 'hood in Detroit, "Do you represent?" Do you represent Christ? Do you value freedom for all people? Do you value the least of these? And do you value going in the power and presence of the Spirit? As you close your time of study and preparation and ministry here at Central Baptist Theological Seminary, Christ is sending you to new assignments as his ambassadors. May you represent him well!—God be with you all!