

Contemporary Issues
The Challenge of Our Age
Matthew 16:13-19; I Timothy 4:6-8

Well, I want to thank everyone who has led in music and prayers and commentary about Christian education. It strikes me as I'm listening to these songs, most of which I don't know, that what the lyrics repeatedly talk about the challenges, the difficulties of being a Christian at all in this age, and maybe especially trying to lead. Though you slay me, it's harder in the West. We have to start singing about the dangers of Christian leadership, a hold to the truth we sang a little while ago, even in the fire, because we know it's difficult in this age.

So what I want to do is talk about the challenges of this age. Living as a Christian, this age with special reference to education and all of our educators and show us that we do have a foundation that allows the mission of the church and of Christian schools to go forward, even as we face the challenges of our day. I want to speak first about the foundation we have for the church and for Christian education. The text is Matthew, chapter 16, verses 13 to 18. A very familiar one. And then we'll be looking at the challenges in this age and the scriptures that apply. Listen to God's Word as I read it to you from Matthew 16.

When Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, who do people say that the Son of Man is? And they said, some say John the Baptist, and others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets. He said to them, but you, who do you say that I am? Simon Peter replied, you are the Christ, the son of the living God. And Jesus answered him, blessed are you, Simon bar Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my father who is in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter. And on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

Let's pray for a moment.

Heavenly father, I do pray that we would know that whatever the challenges in our age, whatever the challenges for Christian education, we do have a rock. We have a sure foundation that enables us to stand firm despite the challenges. We pray... Give us ears to hear what you have to say about that. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

Well, the foundation for the church, the foundation for Christian Education, no doubt, is the person and work of Jesus Christ who is confessed here. Now, Jesus actually was an educator. He was called Rabbi, which means my teacher more than anything else. In all the pages of Scripture. And if you walked around and people said, hey, who's Jesus? The answer was always a teacher or a prophet. The prophet, of course, is a teacher of God. And as a good teacher, Jesus didn't just lecture, he also elicited conversations. And when it was time for the disciples to know who he is, he didn't give them a lecture. He pulled them aside, away from the crowds and posed this question to them, who do people say that to him? And they all gave very good answers.

They would have gotten 100% in the quiz. People say that Jesus is a prophet. He is like Elijah or Jeremiah or one of the prophets. He's a teacher. He's a critic of the status quo. He is someone who gathers disciples to himself and that's correct that two people say Jesus is. And then he said, but what about you? Is your answer the same or different from the common answer? And Simon Peter answered and said, you are the Christ, the son of the living God. Now students study for exams and they do well when they study hard. But Peter hadn't studied hard. This was something that God the Father revealed to him. It was more than he knew. He confessed more than he knew. He said two things. He said, you are the Christ, the Anointed One, to do God's work in the world. And you are the Christ who is the son, not a son, but the son of the living God. And Jesus said, right, this is a good confession. And on this rock that is to say, not the man, Peter, but the confession Peter made on this rock. I will build my church and all of its enterprises, including the enterprise of Christian education, which always starts with the idea that God exists and he cares about this world enough to send his son, his unique son, Savior, the Messiah, and Lord.

Now, as we all know people, sometimes I look at the educators, children, even adults give answers that are better than they know. And Peter certainly was guilty of that this time because. Because a few moments later when Jesus said, yes, it's true, the fathers revealed that I'm the crisis and living God. A few moments later, Jesus said, and this is the kind of Christ I am, I'm going to go to the cross. And when Peter heard that, he said, no way. You can't do that. That's not what the Messiah does. And then Jesus said, well, when you say that you're another kind of a rock, you're a stumbling stone. And in fact, Satan himself is using you at this very moment by saying that which is false. So get behind me, Satan. It's not Peter, the man that makes the confession. Nor is it any teacher as a man or woman who makes the confession. Christ himself is the foundation of the church and of all Christian education, and we get a chance to build on it as we rightly proclaim who Jesus is. We do that, of course, in Bible classes, but we also do it in every class at a seminary.

In a Christian school, we talk about Jesus as creator. We discuss science and the sustainer. When we discuss history, the one who orders all things. Well, when we talk about mathematics. But Jesus also says that on this rock I will build my church. That's very familiar. Know what that means? It means God's going to build his church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. Gates of hell are defensive weapons. Now, what that means is, although the tide of our culture seems to be against us and often is, Christ will build his church and the gates, the defensive weapons, the defenses of hell will not stand against the Lord's work. Now, it doesn't always seem that way, and I could rattle off the statistics about falling attendance at churches and fewer people making professions of faith and decline in Christian schools. Not this one, praise God, but decline in Christian schools and many more things biblical literacy and decline, families falling apart, etc. but I want to tell you that the Lord is building his church and what we're doing here in this place. Seminary. The school above all, is part of what God is doing throughout the world. And what I want to do is take you on a little world tour and discuss what God is doing.

I'll start with a little place that I visited called Singapore. It's an island nation, about 7 million people. I've been there twice teaching seminary classes and pastors. They actually have a seminary there, but it's not very mature. And so they wanted to have a connection to my seminary when I'm not here. Covenant Theological Seminary, I went there in that role. I found that Singapore is perhaps the most diverse nation on earth. All people have to learn four languages just to finish high school. And they're not cognate languages. You know, it's a Chinese language, the Malay language, and English. And I forget what the other thing is. I wrote it down, but I'm not going to find it right now. The people are Chinese and they're Malays and they're Indonesians and they're Indian subcontinent of India, and they're Europeans from many countries.

They speak five principal languages legally, and they have four main religions as well as others. The main religions there are Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism and Christianity. Christianity 50 years ago was about one quarter of one tenth of a percent of the population. Today it's number two. Religion in the land, if you go to Singapore, it's easy to find shrines to all these places and you see quickly how very different they are. We have a couple pictures very quickly we have you're going to see how very different they are from the religion of Christianity. This is the temple of the Sacred Tooth. The temple, the sacred tooth is where actually one of the teeth from Buddha allegedly is at the core shrine. But you'll see, this is about this is about four stories and it's magnificent, dark lacquered wood. And if you go in what you'll find, we'll go to the next place. You'll find people worshipping. Now, when I was there, about 80, 85% of the people were women. It's not a men's religion, apparently, and the vast majority were 70 or 80 or 90 years old. You can see also, perhaps dimly, that on the walls of this place there are guardian deities, and you can buy them for \$88.88, because eight is a propitious number in this religion. For \$88.88 you can get prosperity, wisdom, and longevity. That's a pretty good deal. Nonetheless, there are thousands -they're going unsold because people aren't quite sure they believe it. It's quite a religion. It's a beautiful building. The first time I was there, I happened to be there on some kind of a holy day, and there was one of those monks with a saffron robe and crimson garb around him, and he was kind of dancing around, and he had a shaved head with a long plume of hair, and he was throwing little bags of rice on a sacred fire, and there were little fireworks in the bags of rice and puffs of purple and green and violet and red and orange were filling the air. It's quite a show. What you notice in a place like that, however, is not many people, even at this sacred shrine. And no gospel. I'm going to show another picture, another one of the another one of the places you can worship in a very short span of space is a Hindu temple. That angry looking deity is Kali, which is a female deity who devours, destroys, slays. We'll get another picture of her. Bloody fangs. Bloody teeth, angry eyes. There she is. Come and worship her. We decided not to show you the pictures, but many of the pictures of her have her biting people in half or chopping their arms and legs off with her angry teeth.

The third religion that you will see in that place is Islam. Now, they don't have images of Islam, but I will tell you this, I stood outside a mosque and I watched the people, maybe 400 or so come out, and I saw exactly one person smiling.

Now these three religions have something in common, and that is, there is no gospel. They'll tell you about works, they'll tell you about their ancestors. They'll tell you how to please the deities. In fact, all three of these religions are what's known as fraudulent religions. A fledgling is someone who beats himself, whips himself or herself in the presence of the gods in order to punish himself or herself for their sins, because they do not believe that there is an atonement for sin. Gotta make up for it. If you can't make up for it, you got to punish yourself. I was there one day after the Hindus were walking with their bare feet on coals of fire to punish themselves for their sins.

Now, people today say that Christian education is. And the church is a little bit foolish because we still believe in barbaric things like substitutionary atonement and the anger of God. But I want to tell you as this everybody knows that they've done wrong. What we have to do is decide how are we going to dress what we did wrong, are we going to beat ourselves, or are we going to try to do better somehow? Do enough to please the deities or the God of the Bible? If people have such ideas and people say that Christians are behind the times because they believe that God would accept that propitiate to sacrifice from his Son who comes in our place. And I going to tell you, the idea of substitution may be barbaric in some people's minds, but it's actually everywhere. I don't know, I don't know how children pay for books, I don't know, but I'm guessing they don't pay for it themselves. I'm guessing their parents and their grandparents and maybe some friends and benefactors do. Am I right about this, guys? It's just someone is making a substitution. And Birmingham Theological Seminary, I know for a fact, depends primarily on the gifts that people give to make scholarships possible, largely for inner city pastors. They don't pay for their own education. It's the principle of substitution. And if you think the principle substitution is barbaric, I'm just going to say, why don't you consult one of the most several the most profitable films over the last 20 years or so?

One of them is called Hunger Games. Anybody here? Hunger games, the novels and the movies from 2008 to 2023 made billions of dollars and they rest on the principle substitution. You know the story. There are 12 districts, and they rebel against the center, and the center crushes them and remind them of their wickedness. They send out every year 24 tributes, one male, one female from each district to fight to the death, televised for the enjoyment of this terrible new world. 12 to 18 year olds and little Katniss Evergreen 12 year old tiny little girl has her name drawn. She will surely be slain in the first few moments, but behold, her elder sister Katniss volunteers to be a substitute for her. Surely facing her death. Now I want to ruin the story for you, but it might turn out better for her. I'll just tell you that much.

And then there's the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Also, billions of dollars in about 20 movies or so over a period of years. And if you watch them, you'll notice that every hero at some point seems to say, I'm willing to die for my people. Thor is willing to die for his people all the time. I mean, every movie 2 or 3 times he's willing to die for his people. But even Tony Stark is anybody with me on this? You know who Tony Stark is? The most self-absorbed, money grubbing. Even

Tony Stark ends up saying he's willing to give his life for the world. The principle of substitution is so very well known.

The people in Singapore are educators. They know that they have the privilege of a great infrastructure. They know they have the privilege of a great education, one of the most prosperous and safe and well-regulated countries in the world. And as a consequence, they're willing and able to take the gospel to the world. When I was there, the times I've been there four times over, all the times I've been there, I came to the observation eventually that it seems that the average passer takes 4 to 12 mission trips per year, and the reason is very simple, because they are with and within a six hour flight of about 3 billion people, most of whom are unbelievers. And because they've already learned three or 4 or 5 languages, they aren't daunted by the difficulties of learning Mandarin or Vietnamese or Laotian and all the rest. Away they go to the world, and we're part of that. You're part of that part of the great enterprise of Christian education. Now, there are challenges that come to us then in our world as people are skeptical about Christianity.

There are also challenges that come from the inside. As a Christian educator myself, that is to say, while I'm here as your pastor, I'm mostly a seminary professor over the last 35, almost 40 years by now. And one thing that we see is that the corruptions of society continually end up touching every Christian enterprise, so that at my seminary almost half the students now come Christian students. Almost half the students now come from broken homes, from homes where mom and dad are no longer married. And that has consequences for the way we educate, the fact that we have to take care of them emotionally, not just educationally. But that's not all. There are other challenges and challenges. Praise be to God. Never going to be found in this church never has been found. I shouldn't say never. We have to hold on to faithfulness though the problem as a Christian is diluted,

I guarantee you that some of the people who come to Briarwood Christian School and some who come to the seminary, have been influenced by a certain feeling of clarity that occurs even in the church today. There's a sociologist named Christian Smith. He's a believer. He is a Christian named Christian Smith, who spent some years interviewing high school students and asking them what they believe. And 100% of the students he interviewed were regular churchgoers. And he came up with a sort of a formulation of what they believe. And it's called if you got the outline or if you got an outline, but it's called moralistic therapeutic deism. And there it is, he said. This is what my teenagers who go to church believe. They believe five things.

Number one, there is a creator. God made the world and he watches over life on earth. We can probably agree with that.

Number two, God wants people to be good and nice and fair to each other. You might be able to agree with that.

Number three, the central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about yourself. We might not agree with that.

Number four, God does not need to be and is not particularly involved of people of our lives, except when he's needed to solve a problem. That is to say, God intervenes in this world, but not very much. Only when we really need him.

Number five - good people go to heaven when they die.

That's what people are picking up from their churches. That's what teenagers are picking up from their churches is called moralistic therapeutic deism because it's moralistic be good and go to heaven. It's therapeutic. God will help you if you're in trouble. And it's deistic because God exists and he cares about this world a little bit, but not all that much. Mostly he cares when you're trouble and you cry out to him, but other than that, seek your own happiness. That's a challenge of our age. And our age tells us also that we need to be as secular as we can be in education. Now, I can already refer to this, he said. An education. All educations are making disciples. They all come from a value, from a set of convictions. All educations are catechetical. We could say. In the secular realm right now, the word is be secular. Secular can mean different things. Secular can mean work. This not done by monks and pastors and missionaries. So most of us are secular. But most of the time when somebody says, we want a secular education, we provide a secular education. They mean we've got to keep religion out of the public square.

You don't need to be a Christian to run for political office. You certainly don't need to be a Christian to be a teacher in a public school. what we need to do is keep the Bible out. Let me put it a different way. I've been called upon to stand in front of school boards in my city, Saint Louis, where I live most of the time, and to comment on what's taught in sex education classes, what's taught about gender, and so forth. And when I came in, I knew what I had to say, and I knew how to how I had to present myself. Although I'm an ordained minister, I came in as a professor, and it didn't come in quoting the Bible, because I knew that if I quoted the Bible, even a city with a lot of Christian influence, I knew if I quoted the Bible, I would be instantly disregarded. What I had to do is say research and what's good for students and what the data indicate. And maybe, maybe I can sneak in a word about the order of this world. Because, you see, religion starts wars, people fight over religion. That's the view of our culture today. Sidebar religions do start wars, but atheists start many more. 500 people were put to death, very sadly, by the Spanish Inquisition in a span of 500 years, 500 people were put to death per hour by the communists in China and Russia, and by the French Revolution and all of its atheism. So when somebody says religion starts, wars say, yeah, it's true, religious people start wars. But will be to those who put their hands on the atheists. That's when things really get violent.

We live in a secular age and that's why we need Christian schools. We need Christian schools because our children will hear the dogmas of our age. They'll hear endlessly if we let them. Words that seem to be just common sense in our age. Now, I don't know if you've ever read the Stanford commencement address of Steven Jobs, but it distills in just a few paragraphs the wisdom of secular education.

This is what he said to the body of Stanford grads about 15 years ago. He said this your time is limited. Don't waste it living someone else's life. Don't be trapped by dogma which is living, or the results of other people's thinking. Don't let the noise of other people's opinions drown out your own inner voice. Have courage to follow your heart and your intuition. Your heart and intuition somehow already know what you truly want to become. Everything else is secondary. Follow your heart. Follow your internal voice. Your voice will tell you what is right.

And I have to tell you now, speaking as a pastor, people's heart and intuition will sometimes tell them what's right. If it'll sometimes tell them exactly what's wrong. I've had far too many people come into office and say, Dan, here's what I think. I think that, the founders of our nation, they said, you know, life, liberty, pursuit of happiness, and I should pursue happiness. And I know God wants to be happy. And the best way for me to be happy is free to leave my wife or leave my husband. And I'm hoping you bless my decision to abandon my spouse and my children. Will you please bless that? Because that's what my heart is telling me. The Bible says the heart is deceitful above all things, desperately wicked. Who can, who can know it?

So we need Christian education. Many Christian educators. Now, one of the things that secular people say about Christians is they're a little bit hypocritical. They say this, you know, they say in the church, you say, we're all saved by grace. But then if you come in, let's say, and, you're married to somebody the same gender, the church won't accept that. So you say you're accepting, you offer grace, but you also condemn people for their decisions. You're inconsistent. You're hypocritical. I don't want to say to, you know, actually, everybody knows better than that because in the family and in the workplace, in the school and in the church, we know two things. We celebrate grace and we have standards. That's the way it works.

In my home when my kids were little. And when I watch my grandchildren, we are full of grace and we say these are the rules in the house. You can actually say both things at the same time. I bet you do that at the school we celebrate grace. We forgive kids when they do wrong and we have standards. And when we do that, we're following Jesus, who said to a woman who was very sinful. The story is told in Luke 7. Go in peace, your sins are forgiven. And he said, sin no more. Go in peace. Your sins are forgiven and sin no more in the family. Forgive each other. And we have standards at work. When people make mistakes, we forgive people when they make mistakes and we have standards, he said.

Don't do it anymore. And at the Christian school we offer grace and we have standards both. There's no inconsistency there at all. In fact, all decent people who've been touched by the gospel all know there's truth in them. So here we are. In a day when it's difficult to serve God in a place like education, when people look down on Christian education and think maybe a similar education is foolishness, that old religion, what do we say?

How are we going to stay strong when the tide goes against us? I think of something Paul said very near the end of his life, when he was about to be put to death simply for preaching the gospel. So many people responded that he was branded a troublemaker, no trouble or of

society. So they said the best thing to do since he won't recant, since the Romans were that kind of people, is just kill him. And he knew that was coming. And he wrote to his best friend Timothy, and he said this the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight. I finished the race. I've kept the faith. Henceforth there's laid up for me a crown of righteousness which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award me on that day. Those three simple but profound statements I fought the good fight. I did what lay before me. I finished the race that was also laid before me, and I kept the faith. Now nobody keeps the faith perfectly. And that's why we are thankful for the passage. It Paul says a little bit earlier, which he says, if we are faithless, he is faithful because he cannot deny himself. God is always faithful, morning or not. Nonetheless, the call still goes forward to be faithful and even, I speak to you teachers, I know the enthusiasm of the beginning of the year and how good the kids are for the first few weeks, and how rapidly their goodness decays into badness and misdeeds. And so what we need to do is persevere.

If I may, I'm going to close with a story about perseverance. The story is told by a woman named Annie Dillard, who's a Christian writer, and we're going to have a picture of the place where this takes place, or more like a map of the place where this takes place. This is in northwest Washington, northwest part of the northwest. And this is, this is a picture of the islands that are off the town of Bellingham. And on one of these islands, one of the far flung islands, there was an artistic community, a sort of a drop out of society community where any Dillard lived. And we can, we can say, be done, except if you're if you know anything about water, just imagine what the tides are like with all those rivers. Can you picture that with all those islands. Annie Dillard is in this community, full of painters and writers and survivalists, and she has a friend and her friend's name is Paul. And she goes to Paul, who's an experimental painter, and she says to Paul, how's your painting going? And Paul says, let me tell you a story by way of answer? So, here's a story. Farrar is one of those survivalists, and he was sitting on the beach one day when an Alaskan cedar came down, floating through one of the channels-- very valuable. You can sell it for a lot of money or use it to build a house or some other building. And it's just right there. And he's on the edge. He's just right on the edge of the water. And he's got a little boat, a little non-motorized rowboat right there. And it's high tide near the turn. And he figures he can just roll that far and clip the log to his rowboat and roll back. But he's wrong. He clips the log to his rowboat and the tide catches him, and he starts going away from the land into the channel as the tide carries him along. But it's a valuable log. She doesn't want to unhitch it. He doesn't want to lose this. And so he starts rowing toward home while the tide is carrying him south and west. Fast. It was around sunset when he clipped onto the log, and by 9 p.m. he was rowing north hard and going south fast. It became dark. He began to row by the moonlight. And finally, as the hours go by, midnight passes. 1:00 comes at last and he sees another gigantic island looming farther and farther goes out into the channel, away from land. And then the tide turned. And now, instead of rolling north and going south fast, he's rolling north and going north fast. The tide is carrying him along, sweeping him along. And away he goes. And finally, at six the next morning, he rose back to the spot where he started. His wife is waiting for him,

wondering where he's been all night, with a pretty good guess as to what happened. And the painter said to Annie, so that's how it's going. And she says, what? He said the tide got me and I'm rowing north and I'm going south fast, but the tide is going to turn. I believe it's going to turn. And it's my job to row. Now, that little story told by Annie Dillard, who's a Christian I think applies to all difficult tasks, everything.

It's hard in this increasingly secular age, we often feel that we're rolling as hard as we can and we're going south fast, but we believe the tide will turn. In fact, the tide has turned in nation after nation after nation, and our job is not necessarily seeing all that much success in this age. Our job is to be faithful and to keep rowing until the tide turns. That's what the Bible asks us to do. I'm going to close with just a simple reading from a few verses from Colossians. The Apostle Paul, against the tide of his age, said, we always thank God when we hear of your faith. When we hear of your faith as educators of this you have heard before, it is the word of truth, the gospel which has come to you and indeed in the whole world. It is bearing fruit and increasing even as it does among you.

I believe with all my heart that Christian education is one of the soundest, most powerful ways to see the tide turn, to see our nation and the nations that are starting to stray from the gospel, to come back waiting for God to carry us along.

Let's pray.

Father, I thank you for the educators here and for everybody from Briarwood Christian School and Birmingham Theological Seminary, and from public schools striving to be leaven in society and homeschoolers all striving. To rest on the foundation of who you are, Lord Jesus, and to work it out in their disciplines, whatever they may be, for your glory, the good of the next generation. For those who will lead in times to come. We ask for all of God's strength and endurance for them. All the insight, all the love for their students that you can pour into them.

And we pray it in Jesus' name.

Amen.