



Cultural Research Center



“Lead, Don’t Follow” – 62nd Commencement Address Arizona Christian University, 3 May 2024

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First, let me congratulate each of you who are receiving your degree tonight. Well done!

Now, keep in mind that this is called a commencement ceremony. Commencement, of course, means the beginning.

The beginning of what?

Those of you who were in chapel earlier in the year when I spoke may remember that I referred to ACU as your *spiritual bootcamp*, and that you were being groomed as *spiritual warriors* for the kingdom of God.

You were welcomed to this boot camp because we saw your potential to serve with boldness and distinction. You have been immersed in strategic spiritual development by some of the best trainers in the country.

And now, your boot camp experience is officially over, and your orders have come in. You are being sent to the front lines of the war for the soul of America. It’s time for you to apply your training.

As you get ready to dive into that battle, take heed of what Joshua said to his warriors: “be strong and courageous.” And recall Peter’s exhortation to “be alert and vigilant!”

What should you be “alert” to? Not some videogame version of demonic attack, with fiendish spirits in battle gear, breathing fire while hurling flaming arrows and sharp knives at you. The enemy is too smart and too subtle for that.

I expect him to target you in a covert war of attrition, seeking to catch you off-guard. He’ll try to wear you down, a little bit at a time, hoping to eventually bleed you of your strength and commitment.

It's not a new ploy. You’ve doubtless seen it many times before. Sadly, it often plays out the same:

- A young, enthusiastic, devoted follower of Jesus naively charges into the world, only to get smacked in the face and drained of their optimism, energy and dedication.
- The attacked disciple then sullenly retreats to the life of an armchair Christian, observing the battle from the comfort of their den.

- They cease to engage the world with the life-changing principles and power that God provided for the battle.

Don't succumb to an early exit from the battlefield. You've been well-trained and appropriately warned. The apostle Paul reminds you that this is not a sprint; it is a marathon. Peter, again, warns us to "Watch out for your enemy, the devil. He prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour." Rest assured, my friends, that "**someone**" is you.

But you need not be filled with fear – because you have the full armor and power of God at your disposal. Set your mind and heart on the idea that you are in this battle until the end. Envision yourself serving the King of kings with distinction through a long life of service.

But what should you expect? What should you be on the lookout for so that you are not the victim of a debilitating surprise attack or insidious strategy?

Well, lean on your training:

- We invested heavily in shaping and refining your worldview because it is the filter through which you make every decision, every day, and that philosophy of life is the foundation of your standing as a disciple of Christ.
- People do what they believe, so we taught you to think like Jesus so you can live like Jesus.
- **Your** biblical worldview will direct you to apply the scriptural truths you have learned. As a soldier in God's army, that is your duty. And that is the means through which you will transform a slice of American culture for the glory of God.

You **cannot** take your worldview cues from the culture. It must get them from you!

But therein lies the challenge. As you operate within a society characterized by Syncretism:

- Will you recognize the bad decisions others are making because of their errant worldview?
- Will you intelligently and lovingly resist making those same poor decisions because you know the better alternative – that is, how Jesus would think in your situation?
- And then, will you gracefully influence those around you who have mastered poor judgment to strategically guide them to abundant life in Christ?

Let's return to the question of what this subtle war for your mind will look like. It will be exposure to one popular but false piece of theology or philosophy at a time, seductively offered for your consideration.

And don't be surprised if the temptations come from your friends. They may start the covert attack by praising the virtues of humanity, asserting that people are basically good, they just occasionally make inappropriate choices. They will warn that **you** have no right to judge them, because everyone expresses their goodness and wisdom in their own unique way.

But you know better than that.

You know every person is born a slave to sin and consistently succumbs to the pressure to sin. We are not good people. Nobody is good, we are all depraved and wicked, desperately in need of God's grace and redemption. Our arrogance and self-reliance, rather than humility and dependence on God, is common and comfortable – but don't give in. Help your friends and peers to resist temptation, and to recognize and repent for selfishness and sinfulness.

Lead them, don't follow them.

The attack will include people vehemently proclaiming that only *they* know what is true for their life, and you must *not* question their personal truth. They will argue that there are no moral absolutes, so you *must* respect and accept their moral choices, even if the result is abortions, lies, theft, or adultery. In their eyes, they have ample justification for their moral choices, whether you like it or not. After all, it *feels* right to them.

But you know better than that.

You understand that God *is* truth. He has tangibly defined truth for us in His written words. His truth principles are the *only* truth principles.

Granted, we must *respect* people who are morally wrong and who misrepresent God's truth, because God created them, loves them, and is counting on you to bring them closer to Him.

But in doing so, *never* acquiesce to their false representations of His truth. *Never* accept their violations of God's truth as legitimate, simply because they claim that right. *Show them*, through your actions, what biblical truth and morality looks like, and how God honors it.

Lead them, don't follow them.

These days it is common to hear that humans have no right to dominate plants, animals, or nature. Many contend that those entities have unique spirits, and that we are called to live harmoniously and interdependently with them. Plants, animals, and nature, they assert, are just as valuable as people.

But you know better than that.

You can explain that in the heavenly hierarchy, humans are just a little lower than angels. You are equipped to explain how much we matter to God, and that He has given us dominion over all other created things on earth.

Lead them, don't follow them.

One of the fastest-growing and most popular spiritual refrains in our culture is the agnostic war cry that nobody knows – or can know – if God exists. Therefore, you must keep your pro-God comments to yourself because they are just unproven theories and superstitions.

But you know better than that.

You have eyes to see and a mind to comprehend the beauty and the complexity He has created, that even stone-cold atheists and God-haters enjoy. You are aware of the extensive historical and archaeological evidence that points to the existence of an omnipotent supernatural authority.

You can remind them that when they see a masterful painting in a museum, they never question the existence of its artist. Or, that upon seeing a skyscraper, they realize there had to be an architect. Or, when they enjoy a gourmet meal, they do not assume the food randomly assembled and cooked itself, but that it was the work of a master chef. How, then, can they view the intricacy, complexity, beauty, and variety of the universe, or the human body, and deny the existence of a glorious Creator?

Beyond that, nobody can deny the *personal relationship* you have with that living God, who cares about you and is deeply involved in your life – and who wants to be deeply involved in the lives of those who question or deny His existence. Be ready to be used to reach and transform those doubters, with His wisdom and power coursing through you.

Lead them, don't follow them.

You probably know people who proudly proclaim that they are “spiritual, but not religious”. People who argue that there is no one, true faith. Friends who insist that it doesn't matter what faith you embrace, as long as you have some type of faith.

That unfortunate mindset dominates our culture today. In a nation where Syncretism is the reigning worldview, we have made it our dominant faith, as well, even in many of our Christian churches.

But you know better than that.

- You know from personal experience, as well as your training, that there *is* only one, true God.
- You know first-hand that *His* truths rule the universe, whether humanity acknowledges and accepts them or not.
- You know that Satan is hard at work promoting alternatives to biblical Christianity.
- You know that false religions and philosophies are used by the adversary as deceptions to destroy individual lives.

Knowing these realities and addressing them strategically is part of your calling and God-given purpose.

Lead them, don't follow them.

One of the strongest temptations you will face concerns success. You are educated, connected, capable, hopeful, and energetic. Society will persist in telling you that success is about how much wealth you control, your physical appearance, your popularity, your sexual satisfaction, the toys you possess, your professional rank and potential, and more. You will be pushed into the rat race and encouraged to devote yourself to getting ahead in order to win that race.

But you know better than that.

It's the wrong race. That's a race that will distract and spiritually immobilize you. You were bought at an incomparable price to serve the King of kings, not the rulers, messengers, and wannabes of this world.

Paul encourages you to run the good race – the race of *biblical faith*. When you leave this world, all the goodies and shiny objects you accumulated will remain here. All that will matter is your connection to God, through Jesus, empowered by His Holy Spirit. *Nothing* can surpass or replace that. Success, after all, is consistent obedience to God.

Lead them, don't follow them.

Yes, you are a warrior, and war is brutal. We romanticize it in our movies and TV shows, but there is nothing romantic about setbacks, suffering, and pain. There is nothing uplifting about losing colleagues in the course of battle to sin, doubt, or disappointment. But the fact remains: Jesus *promised* His followers persecution and suffering as they do good things – the *right* things – to promote Him and His agenda.

All too often, we treat hardships and rejection as signs that we are on the wrong path. We equate God's will with experiencing comfort, happiness, and security.

But you know better than that.

You understand that in war, the enemy doesn't bother to attack soldiers who are *not* a threat. The persecution you face for seeking to advance His kingdom is simply the price you pay to effectively carry out His commands. The ridicule you endure for unapologetically proclaiming His righteousness is a mark of spiritual prestige.

Don't be discouraged or deterred by the predictable hardships of the battle. War is ugly and painful. Fighting the good fight is challenging, but honorable and rewarding. It is what He has called and equipped you to do.

Lead them, don't follow them.

As you prepare to launch into the next phase of your life in Christ, remember that the Church is not a building, an institution, a place holding events, or an organization to join. The Church of Christ is a *community* of like-minded Jesus-lovers, who support each other in the effort to know, love, and serve God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.

So, engage in worldview and missional conversations with fellow Christians in order to always be prepared to give a reason for *what* you believe, *why* you believe it, and to *model your beliefs* through your lifestyle.

That's how you lead them, rather than follow them.

Remember, your life is *not about you*. It's about being present *for* and *with* God, knowing His truth, and being available to use His truth to engage and transform lives. Every culture is changed one life at a time. You now have the tools to effectively participate in God's transformational movement. What an exciting privilege that is.

But, again, it *is* warfare. An agent of transformation serving the kingdom of God is a spiritual warrior. *That* is your new identity. *That* is what you have been trained for. Don't get diverted, discouraged, or deceived.

- You serve the *victor*.
- You're *armed* with truth.
- You have access to the *armor of God* for protection.
- You serve at *His command* and under *His authority*.
- You, my friends, are set up to *win*.

I am honored to join with the rest of ACU's faculty, administration, and staff to congratulate you on the successful completion of your spiritual training. You are ready for deployment.

Welcome to the *Firestorm Battalion*. It's time to move forward.

*Dr. George Barna is the Director and Co-Founder of the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University. He is also an ACU professor, focusing on worldview assessment and development, and cultural transformation. He was the founder and leader of the Barna Group, a research company that has set the standard for understanding trends in American culture. He has spent more than 40 years studying the intersection of faith and culture, as well as pioneering worldview research in America. Dr. Barna has written 60 books, including numerous award-winners and New York Times bestsellers. His most recent book is **Raising Spiritual Champions: Nurturing Your Child's Heart, Mind and Soul**, an Amazon #1 Bestseller.*

*More information about the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University is available at: www.CulturalResearchCenter.com. For more information about **Raising Spiritual Champions** (including quantity discounts), visit www.RaisingSpiritualChampionsBook.com. It is also available for purchase on Amazon.*

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