

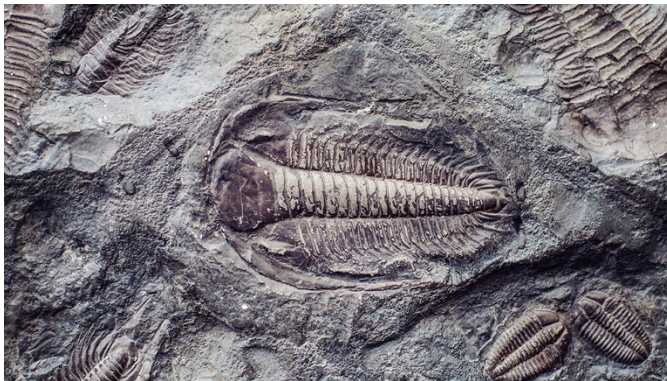
What Graduating Seniors Ask

Philippians 3: 12-16

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**April 18, AD 2021
Gerrit Scott Dawson**

“Straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3: 13-14). That’s the guiding theme for our celebration of senior Sunday today. I’d like to start by remembering Russ Stevenson who served our church as senior pastor for twenty years. Russ could express his brilliant mind through very clear words and illustrations. This made him able to relate to people of all ages and stages. Russ began doing a yearly class for high school seniors. He wanted to prepare them for some of the challenges to faith that college might throw their way. I was delighted to inherit that tradition, and it’s always a highlight to spend four weeks with our seniors. In the first class, I pass out 3 by 5 index cards and invite students to write any question they’d like to talk about. So as we honor our graduates today, and with their permission, I thought it might be encouraging to take up some of those questions and consider how we answered them. We’ll look at three categories: intellectual, relational and spiritual.



1) Intellectual. Here’s one that came up in several questions. *Can you believe in evolution as well as believe in Christianity?* Short answer: yes. Longer answer: that’s a loaded question. Many of us have a crisis growing up when the creation of the world as it’s told in Genesis bumps up against the idea of an earth

billions of years old in which life developed over eons through a process of random mutation and survival of the fittest, otherwise known as natural selection. The reason for the feeling of conflict and crisis is not as much at the scientific level as it is at the *worldview* level.

That means we have to talk about worldviews, the particular way we look at what’s here and how we answer the big questions about *why we are here* and what we’re supposed to be doing. We realize that for some materialistic evolution

seems to offer a reason for everything. You can explain how we got here without any reference to God. And if you can, then it's ok to exclude God and declare that anyone who notices evidence of design is an idiot. Anyone who questions the theory is foaming fundamentalist. That's why evolution seems to threaten Biblical faith. Because the theory is used to advance a worldview that excludes a Creator.

So we had to talk about the historical reality that science as we know it, the method of inquiry, hypothesis and conclusion, developed in the Christian western culture, not somewhere else. Our worldview that God created a cosmos that is ordered, reliable, good, and explorable allowed the scientific method to rise. We believe that knowing and describing nature as it is gives glory to the God who made it and gave it a real existence. We are unafraid of the truth, because all truth is God's. Christianity majors on realism. If the world developed through an evolutionary process, that doesn't mean God didn't guide it.

At the same time, our realism also means that we ask questions of everything. It's very important to realize the difference between a scientist and a fundamentalist. A teacher who implies you must not ask questions or raise doubts about evolution is not a scientist, but a fundamentalist. Christian confidence allows us to question if six twenty four days is the only way to read Genesis. Christian confidence also allows us to ask questions of evolution. Such as: where are all the transitional species in the fossil record? Why do the fossils in the Cambrian explosion show so many of the major groups of sea life appearing at once? How do you explain the irreducible complexity in an eye or in blood coagulation simply by random mutations? If the only answer to those very reasonable scientific questions is, "You're an idiot for asking!" then you know you're dealing *not* with another scientist but with a fundamentalist. Christians love science precisely because of the God we meet in Scripture. We don't love the shutting down of questions and challenges because of a rigid anti-faith worldview.



2) Relational. Another set of questions centered around relationships. There were positive questions: *How do you meet good new friends? How do you find other believers in college?* We recognized that leaving

home and starting a brand new school has both positive and negative aspects. The

great thing is that you're free at last from the ridiculous social pecking order that occurs in high school. You no longer have your socially mandated place. You're free. No embarrassing incidents follow you. It's a fresh start full of opportunity. But that also means you don't have the comfort of knowing your peer group so well. I recalled how first semester I spent time with people totally unlike me, people I would not be friends with for the long haul, but was so fascinated to meet and to know. Sometimes it was scary and sometimes it was lonely. But lots of times it was just exhilarating to encounter people so different from me.

I survived, though, because I sought out Christian fellowship. There can be a lot of hostility towards Christians on campus. Thankfully, every school to which our seniors are going has strong groups of Christians. Darin Travis spent two decades in college ministry, so he shared with us which groups are robust and how to find them. We talked about finding good churches and, if you're in town, staying connected to us. We also talked about how you don't have to trumpet your faith so loudly or so quickly that you get ostracized. But you can drop some hints in conversations and open up possibilities for other believers to be known to you. Believers in Jesus share the same Spirit—we have a nose for each other.

One student asked, *“How do you know if your friends and people around you are supporting your growth in Christ?”* That's a great question because you can't always tell when you're making a new friend, especially if he or she is so different. So we talked about learning to reflect at the end of the day on encounters that you've had. Take note of how you feel after you've spent time with someone. Do you feel filled in, full, peaceful, and hopeful? Or do you feel empty, guilty, anxious and cynical? What have you been talking about? Have you been laughing because you're enjoying witty word play and all the funny things there are in the world? Or have you laughed at the expense of others you are cutting down? Have you been mocking and acting superior? These reflections don't mean you have to stop being friends with someone if their influence tends toward the negative. But it means you might limit the amount of time. Or take special care to be intentional about being kind and growthful in these encounters. Talk to God about your relationships and what effect they're having on you.



3) Spiritual. The questions got a bit edgier when our students considered the potential conflicts they might

face because of their faith. *When someone says, 'You're only a Christian because your parents are,' how do you respond?* That gets to the heart of the biggest challenge to Christian faith when you leave home. Have I been coasting on my family's belief and habits? Or is this trust in Christ really my own? If you've just been dabbling in the faith, then you will be easily led astray. You may want to try out other ways of believing and other ways of living. Sometimes, of course, living a pagan lifestyle leads to consequences you don't want but will hound you for a lifetime. I told them about a student from LSU that came to see me a few years ago. She had been raised going to church and had even trusted her life to Christ. But two years into college, she decided to take a break from God. She was stunned that in just six months of doing whatever she wanted, she had ruined much of her life. Relationships. Health. Finances. Faith. She was covered in guilt and needed a lot of care to find a way back. It's crucial to think ahead of time about the faith and morality you may have taken for granted growing up. You can do so much damage so fast.

So I was very glad for questions such as *"What are the ways I can get closer to God?"* And *"How do you stand firm in your faith when temptations surround you?"* We spent one session looking intensely, then, at *"How do I come alive to Christ?"* Once again, being intentional and aware is crucial. So, step one is realize what life is like without Christ. We worked through a list of mistaken, even tragic beliefs in those who do not know Christ:

- You are accountable to no one but yourself.
- It's up to you to make the best of your life and get what you can however you can.
- Revenge is better than forgiveness.
- Saving face is better than humility.
- Having it now is always better than waiting, even if reckless.
- Money can actually buy you happiness and love.
- You don't know what to do with guilt except defend yourself and accuse others.
- You face a constant struggle with boredom and a sense of deadness.
- You feel like you are never measuring up, though you don't know who's setting the standards.
- You don't enjoy what you have.
- You are selfish and demanding in relationships.

- You are afraid. You fear being found out. You fear you are a fake. You fear you don't know the rules of the game. You fear you will not be cared for.

We had agreement around the table that indeed those who reject Christ choose some increasingly futile and unsustainable ways to cope. By contrast, we reclaimed the treasure that belongs to those who are in Christ. Here's another list:

- The world is not here by accident, but by God's design and creation.
- That means you are not an accident or a mistake. You were created for a reason.
- That also means God has a claim on your life because he made you.
- God has a purpose for your life and wants to guide you.
- God's purposes and claims are based on his love.
- This love puts money and ambition and achievement into proper perspective.
- For instance, serving is more fulfilling than acquiring selfishly.
- Forgiveness is more energizing and powerful than revenge.
- Kindness to others creates happiness.
- Gratitude to God creates joy.
- Life goes on after death.
- We are accountable to God. That fact orders our priorities.
- There is a higher purpose to my life than fulfilling my immediate desire for pleasure, excitement or thrills.
- A life drawing its direction from a source in God is never bored.
- In God, the world comes alive with wonder and interest.

This list fills us with hopefulness and peace. The depth and joy of life is found in Christ alone. But of course we have to draw upon Christ. We have to quest to know him. We have to serve him by caring for others and sharing his love. As Paul said in the Scripture that opened this message: "forgetting what is past and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3: 13-14).

Grabbing hold of this treasure through vigorous faith enables us to answer one more question. *How do you share your worldview with people who won't hear it because they're so focused on their own?* Well, it's crucial to learn to say your own Christian worldview clearly and in many different ways. And it's all crucial to ask to listen to other worldviews. Ask the worldview questions: What do you feel is the purpose of human existence? What do you think went most wrong with the world? What do you think can be done about it? Listen. Really listen. And then ask

if you can briefly share how you see the world. I know that I believe that God made the world and made humans to know God, to love God and one another. I know that Jesus Christ came to put the broken world back together and that he is putting me back together all the time. You don't have try to convert anybody. Just share the truth at the heart of your life and belief.

I love the questions our seniors ask. They are a lot like the questions all of us ask, aren't they? Pray for them as they graduate and venture out into a wider world. Take notice of them when they come back to church. Ask about them. Make sure they know they always have a home here, and we're ready to go as deep, as real, as edgy, as epic as they need to go. Because we know that Christ Jesus is the truth, the one truth who satisfies us in the depth of our souls and for the rest of our days.