

# “Umbilical Christianity”

Ephesians 3:14-21



Dr. Will Cotton  
Senior Pastor

There are some interesting quotes I found this week about graduation. One comes from Garry Trudeau, “Commencement speeches were invented largely in the belief that outgoing high school or college students should never be released into the world until they have been properly sedated.”

Another one is by Robert Orben, “A graduation ceremony is an event where the commencement speaker tells thousands of students dressed in identical caps and gowns that ‘individuality’ is the key to success.”

I’ll never forget the births of our boys. Tyler’s birth was difficult, as he was a very large baby. Because Tyler had been so big, the doctors advised us to have Reece delivered about 10 days early. That was wise, for even then he was already over 8 pounds. His delivery was much easier, except for one thing. The umbilical cord was wrapped around Reece’s neck. I just remember the gynecologist saying, “And that’s one, and that’s two, and that’s three.” Had he gone to full term, we don’t know what would have happened. I had a seminary prof who told us, “Never forget that you have an umbilicus.” You know what an umbilicus is, don’t you. Yes, it’s your navel. It’s a reminder to each one of us that we were once connected to our mothers inside the womb. Many of you fathers have had the privilege of cutting the umbilical cord after your child was born. For me, that was an awesome moment. From then on nutrition and waste removal would be much more complicated. Our Native American brothers and sisters have a tradition on the reservation. When a child is born and the umbilical cord is severed, it is then buried in the ground. That ritual reminds every Native American that they are connected to the land on which they live. I have entitled this baccalaureate sermon, “Umbilical Christianity.”

Graduates, I know that you have been told by some and you may have even declared to your parents that some day you will be totally free, that you will be your own person. Ha! Not gonna happen! Next week, you will be meeting several of the Cotton and Davis family members. We don’t just look like them. We act like them, too, even in the ways we said we’d never be like them. Everything you see will say “they’re connected.” When we were standing at the casket of my grandma Cotton, my dad was holding on to his mom’s arm and saying, “Son, I know she’s not here anymore, but I can’t let go.” What was he saying? “At 50 years old, I’m still connected.”

Today and in this coming week, you are making steps toward independence. And as you do, I want to remind you of the ways you are still connected. Paul, in Ephesians does that by saying what he is praying for. We pray for the same things for you. Paul first writes, **I pray that out of his riches He may strengthen you with power through His Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.**

We do pray that you will be filled with strength by God’s Spirit. You are going to need it. To this moment, you have known a certain environment that you could trust and depend on. Now that is going to be sifted. Friends will invite you to compromise your moral standards. Be wise in your choices. Fraternities are not always what they say they are. Parties are not always - well, you learned that in high school. There will be some professors and fellow students who will encourage your faith and some who will belittle your

Christian faith and treat it as weak and obsolete. I encourage you to be part of the Wesley Foundations at the schools you are in. At this point, I understand that you are going to Texas Tech, the University of Oklahoma, the University of Texas and Tasmania University. I don't know about Tasmania, but there are great Wesley Foundations at each of the other three Universities. You are all going to big schools that you can get lost in easily. Since I didn't know much about Tasmania University, I looked it up on the net. In 2006, it had 17,407 students. It had the listing of the groupings, which included 2 continuing students that were "unknown." It made me wonder how many students are unknown at the other three Universities represented. Getting connected with a group that will strengthen your faith while your values and beliefs are being sifted and tested is crucial. Our prayer is that you come out of college stronger in your faith than it is right now.

Then Paul writes, **I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.** Always remember that you can't go higher or farther than you are deep. In the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson, "What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us."

You have roots. You have been established. Your parents, your church, and your friends that share your values and your experience of Christ are part of your root system. There is much that will be fluff that will be disguised as that which is deep and lasting. Not only will you be tested and sifted by what you see and learn, you must also test and sift what is around you.

*The story is told of a hunter who went out in the woods when he met a bear. The bear asked, "What do you want?" The hunter said, "I want a fur coat." The bear said, "That's fair enough. I, on the other hand want a full stomach. Can't we talk about it and negotiate? Perhaps we can come up with a compromise?" Half an hour later the bear ambled away. On the ground was the hunter's gun. As you stop to think of what happened, you realize they both got their wish – the bear got his full stomach and the man got his fur coat."*

Just because somebody has money makes them more right and the same with lots of degrees. You will have to fight to be true to who you are. But with the proper rooting, the next few years of your life will be a time of amazing growth.

Then Paul prays that they will **"know this love that surpasses knowledge."** If you know Paul that phrase is astonishing. He studied under the top minds of his day. He was raised a Pharisee. Knowing the right thing and doing the right thing was everything. But Paul discovered the hard way what we can learn sooner. It's not what you know or even who you know as much as it is knowing that you are loved by the one who created you, died for you in Christ and sustains you by His Holy Spirit within. You live in the information age. What you know will largely determine how successful you'll be. But it will not determine how fulfilled or happy you will be. Only shared love can do that.

One of the myths you have already heard and will hear even more beyond commencement is that your Christian faith is for weak people who need a crutch to live by. To the contrary, Paul writes, **"Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work with us, to Him be glory in the church."** The truth is, you will never be more accomplished, more high impact, more wise and more successful than when you are in full partnership with Christ. The great news commentator, the late Tom Brokaw wrote, "You are educated. Your certification is in your diploma or your degree. You may think of it as the ticket to the good life. Let me ask you to think of an alternative. Think of it as your ticket to change the world."

You have an umbilicus, the reminder that you once were connected physically and that you will always

be connected by blood and by relationship. In Jesus Christ, you are connected by the blood of Christ on the cross, the body of Christ in the Church, and the relationship with Christ through the Holy Spirit and with those you love. Connection can be important.

Many moons and many pounds ago, I went rock climbing and rappelling. Due to my inexperience, clumsiness and being much stronger in the legs than upper body, I decided to go up the middle range face, a challenging route. I put on my harness that connected me to my belay man up on the top, who was also connected to a tree. I fell from that face five times. The scars I received were not from hitting the bottom but from hitting the face of the cliff as my connection pulled up the slack. To me, your parents, your friends and your church are like the belay people and God is like the tree.

Hear me, as a parent and as a pastor. Stay connected. Strengthen your connections. The greatness of your future depends on it.