

## **Service of Dedication Message**

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### T R A N S C R I P T

**Be strong and courageous! ... The LORD your God will go ahead of you.**

*Deuteronomy 31:6 (reading: Deuteronomy 30:10 - 31:6)*

#### **INTRODUCTION**

If I were to make a list of the worst ways to spend a day, a conference on the future of higher education comes in right between root canals and high school reunions.

Stuck all day in a windowless hotel basement conference center, sitting on chairs that are too hard, drinking diet cokes that are too expensive, and listening to speakers reinvent worn out cliques about the future of higher education, is not my picture of success.

In a book on the College Presidency, it was said this way, “Almost any educated person can deliver a lecture entitled ‘The Goals of the University.’ But there are very few people who will voluntarily sit through that kind of lecture.”

Early on in my career, a friend told me, when you go to a conference, if you come home with one good idea, one new friend, and one new joke, consider it a success.

Well, I went to a conference in April, and although it was a surprisingly good program, I didn’t pick up a single good joke. But I did come home with more than I ever thought possible. And it came about, only because the Lord went way ahead of me.

Every four years the administrators from all the Council for Christian Colleges and University schools come together for an International Forum. This time the gathering of over 1,400 was held in Atlanta - and an important highlight of this event was that our dance department was showcased.

I was doing my best to connect with lots of old friends, make some new ones, and especially touch base with the presidents of the other 200 schools, although with that many people milling around, they were hard to find.

University presidents have a peculiar and predictable routine when we see each other. We ask how’s it going, and always answer that we’re having our best year ever, enrollment is at a record high, the faculty love me, the money is flowing like a river, and usually add in something about how well one of our athletic teams has done, just to rub it in a bit – very little of which is ever close to accurate.

But with a few presidents I've known for a long time, we cut through the junk and talk straight. And so when I came up the escalator in the Atlanta Marriott hotel and saw my friend Niel Nielson, the president of Covenant College, I was glad to bump into someone who calls it clearly.

I'd read Niel's letter to Covenant's constituency that came out 2 years ago, after the financial crisis hit, in which, he very directly outlined a number of dramatic stewardship cuts they were making. They were addressing many of the things we changed years ago when we were in such tough shape financially, and so I could read between the lines to know just what he was feeling, and also the good that would come from those decisions.

But the snapshot he gave me at the conference was very different from that letter. God had blessed Covenant during the challenge of the economy. And honoring the stewardship they put in place, especially the church giving, along with a couple of unexpected huge estate gifts got them back on track in a very solid way.

I was thrilled to hear of their success, because Covenant is an important institution in the blend of Christ-centered schools.

So I asked Niel, if he was going to continue with the earlier program and staff cuts he'd outlined, or if they were backing up on them. He said they would restore some, and others needed to go forward – like selling off their adult education program, which they call Quest – which is just like our adult programs in Jackson, Memphis, Orlando, and Houston.

Last fall they started the process to close down Quest and move out of adult education so they could concentrate solely on residential education. And if you've seen their beautiful mountain top campus, you know why.

Well, my ears perked up, and hardly without thinking I said, "instead of selling it, why don't you bequeath it to your cousin Belhaven, and we'll continue to teach it from a strong biblical perspective in the Reformed tradition." But I was quick to add that we don't have any money to buy it.

I like Niel because he's a Kingdom perspective person, and within the next few minutes we had set up a meeting with their provost and CFO, who also happened to be at the conference. And at 7 am the next morning, over a cup of coffee, we worked out the framework of a deal that transferred Quest to Belhaven

- allowing Belhaven to use our gifts at running distant campuses, and Covenant to save money by not supporting the infrastructure to run a single alternative delivery program;
- allowing Belhaven to serve their 190 Quest students, and Covenant not to lay off 10 dedicated staff and lots of part-time faculty;
- providing Belhaven a platform to broaden our academic offerings in Chattanooga and Atlanta, while Covenant could be a champion to their local constituency, not abandoning the needs of adult students.
- And, all of this happened without one dime exchanging hands.

If that's not a Kingdom deal, I've never seen one. And as many times as I've watched the Lord go before Belhaven, nothing has ever moved as quickly, smoothly, and as clearly as this remarkable demonstration of God's people working for the greater good.

In the note I got from Niel on the day Quest officially became ours, he said:

"It's wonderful when a plan suits and serves all parties as well as this one does. I'm grateful for the responses we've gotten from virtually all quarters, including Quest staff, Covenant board/faculty/staff, and community and denominational leaders.

There seems to be a ready recognition that this is, in God's providence, a win/win, with both Covenant and Belhaven enabled to pursue their distinctive missions and strategic purposes through this transition."

Quest has become a remarkable demonstration of the Lord going before us – and this was one of those unique times when we are allowed, so clearly, to watch God paving the way.

But there have been a host of other demonstrations of God going before us at Belhaven, including important advances like:

- Acquiring this beautiful Center for the Arts
- Starting football
- Facilitating online education growth
- Establishing international partnerships

- And changing our name to university

More personally seeing God go before us can also be demonstrated the in the unique set of circumstances that brought so many of us to Belhaven.

Tonight I wish I had more such exciting new advances to share with you. I'd like to start out this school year by announcing a list of significant breakthroughs that demonstrate clearly how God has gone before us, like Quest, so we would never question that our future is in the Lord's hands.

Instead, I need to inform you some very troubling and tough challenges:

One of our beloved faculty members is facing a horrible diagnosis of extremely fast moving cancer . . .

Oh, I'm sorry, that was in my notes from 2006 when I told you about Dr. Paul Reece.

But thanks to the prayers of thousands of people God performed a miracle and we're so thankful you're here tonight Paul, healthy and vibrant and a powerful testimony to all of us that God goes before us, even as we glimpse the valley of the shadow of death.

I do need to report to you tonight that a massive hurricane is headed toward us as we begin this school year. It is likely to shut down classes, send all our students home or huddled together with no power and little food and water, and we will have no way to communicate with them to know if they will come back when we recover. It will cost us \$2.1 million in direct costs and lost revenue . . .

I'm reading old news again, that was in 2005, and we survived Katrina. I still remember standing on my back porch during the storm and calling friends around the country to start raising money.

And between what we raised and what we cut out of the budget we broke even on that \$2.1 million. Now that we look back, we can see how God was going before us.

Well, this report is important: God seems to be opening doors for us to be the first evangelical school to offer a major in dance, but the only studio space we have is an abandoned weight room, and we have no idea where to find qualified evangelical faculty. . . .

Oh, that was 1997, and now we have the premier program in the country, so it's pretty clear God went before us.

On final and scary report – an economic tsunami has hit the world, the stock is market plummeting, too-big-to-fail companies are folding, and massive program cutting and employee layoffs are happening all across higher education. And with that on the horizon, our flexible bond rate is going to go through the roof and cause us to dramatically cut faculty and staff unless we can refinance at a fixed rate. . . .

Again, old news because we refinanced at a very favorable locked in rate just days before the banking system shut down new loans.

I could give you report after report all evening long if we had the time.

When we think back on how God has lead us through some very tough challenges, about all we can say is “WOW!” God really has gone before us, even when we thought we were looking into a future of overwhelming trouble.

So often we trumpet God's going before us when everything comes out the way we'd planned, or better than we ever expected. But when circumstances appear to turn against us, we are far too quick to assume God no longer goes before us, and we're on our own.

But nothing could be further from the truth.

The Israelites had escaped slavery, abuse, and oppression. What they believed to be impossible, God made possible as he went before them. The Lord prepared the right leader, created among the people the right culture to accept dramatic change, and influenced the opposition in supernatural ways to free the Israelites.

Not only did they escape as God demonstrated his power through a series of plagues, but then to stamp one more exclamation point on their remarkable path, He opened the sea so the people could cross and then, just as suddenly, let the water sweep in on their pursuers who were in range of overtaking them.

But it wasn't only in the monumental events that God went before the Israelites. We see in the Exodus how the Lord daily cared for these people as He pointed the way with a cloud, provided water through striking a rock with a stick, and through miraculous appearance, delivered just enough food to sustain them for each day.

God's promise to go before us is not confined to those times when we are stuck and can't get out of a crisis. But this is a promise in the routine of daily living as well.

If we will work and live knowing that the Lord himself – the creator God of the universe – goes before us in both the critical moments, and in the ordinary moments of daily living, we can, “be strong and courageous!”

If we know the Lord is leading, three characteristics will define us as followers:

1. CONFIDENCE will ground us
2. COMMITMENT will prepare us
3. CALLING will compel us

### **1. CONFIDENCE will ground us**

You'd think, having experienced God going before you in such a dramatic way as did the Israelites – having seen it all that with your own eyes, you would obey and trust God no matter what came after that.

But these people were quick to forget when they looked ahead at the next big challenge.

Instead of focusing forward, they first needed to be looking back and remembering how God chose Moses, how seven plagues came, how the Red Sea parted so they could escape. Instead, these people, who had experienced one of the most remarkable adventures recorded in history, became so focused on their fears of what was ahead that they didn't trust that God was still going before them.

And too often, we abandon our trust in God at the first sign of trouble. When we get a good surplus in our operating budget, have an enrollment boost, receive a big gift, open a new building, program, campus – we're quick to give God credit for going before Belhaven. But when things don't go as we'd hoped, and the fearful is ahead of us, like the Israelites, we too, lose our confidence that God is going before us.

He is – but we just won't be able to see it for a while. And that is why, to be people who are going to trust that God is going before us, we need to be looking back as often as we look ahead.

It is in looking back, that the Lord grounds us in confidence. It kind of works like this: Looking ahead in our work and our personal life, we can quickly become overwhelmed by our challenges. At work it feels like:

- Our options are narrowed because of the financial limitations of this economy, the tough environment for giving, and the pressure on tuition price-point.
- Its getting too tough to fight against the competition from both community colleges, with their low tuition, and for-profit schools, with their endless marketing budgets.
- There is an anchor holding us down because of new demands in governmental regulations and endless accrediting demands.
- Higher education has become so skewed that the best students expect a free education, and the least prepared students take forever to get on track toward success.
- and that list could go on . . .

And then you go home, where maybe

- you're caught in a financial struggle that is getting more hopeless
- there are challenges with your kids that seem overwhelming
- demands to keep it all going are straining to a breaking point
- and the anxieties feel increasingly crushing

That list could go on – and as we look into that future, about all we can say is YIKES!

Today, the future is ominous—but then, the future has always been ominous!

When we look ahead at our challenges personally, organizationally, or globally, we say “yikes” because the unknown is overwhelming. It often seems that it would be impossible for God to go ahead of us into that mess.

So look back!

And when we look back, we see the route we've already traveled behind us is very much like the one ahead. But in looking back, we can trace how the Lord has gone before us, and all we can say is “WOW.”

You see, only in looking back do we always clearly see how God goes before us. So the more anxious we are about the future, the more we need to take time to look back and find confidence that even in what overwhelmed us, God was going ahead.

The Reformed Baptist pastor Charles H. Spurgeon more eloquently reminds us of this truth in his nineteenth-century devotional book *Morning and Evening*:

“Look back believer: Think of your doubting God when He has been faithful to you—think of your foolish outcry of “Not so my Father,” when He crossed His hand in affliction to give you the larger blessing: Think of the many times when you have read His providences in the dark, misinterpreted His dispensations, and groaned out, ‘All these things are against me,’ when they are all working together for your good!”

Or put it another more simple way: **you either believe in the sovereignty of God or you don't.** And if God is sovereign – then, He is sovereign over ALL of life.

We need to learn to regularly look back to find the confidence to go forward, because only in looking back can we be assured of the constancy of God's care. And keeping an eye on the past, with rejoicing and thanksgiving, allows us to look to the challenges ahead with confidence and purpose.

When I was in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade my best friend was Jewish. And I thought it wasn't really fair that at my church we got two good holidays a year, and at his he got 13 – most of which were much longer than one day. I was so jealous that he was always getting out of school for a Jewish holiday.

But, of course, years later, as I understood the Jewish tradition, I learned that each of those holidays – if genuinely celebrated – is time set aside to look back and remember how God has lead the Jewish people.

Well, we don't have 13 prescribed holidays to do that, so let me share with you a process for remembering God's leading that I've been doing that the past 23 years.

It's fail-safe – if you want to most vividly remember how God has led you.

When I reach those moments in life when I feel the anxieties beginning to overwhelm – because of difficulties at school or personally – I list those challenges that have me consumed on an index card. I take enough time to think them through so I'm sure I've got them all, and write down what I'm seeing ahead that makes me say “yikes!”

And then once I've thought through that list, and I'm sure it's complete, I put it away in the back of my Bible or in my desk, and I wait for about six months. And when I

pull out the list again, it amazes me how every time – every single time for 23 years – nearly everything on that list found a solution.

Sometimes, like this summer with the acquisition of Quest, we get to look ahead and clearly watch God go before us. But always, we can look behind us and see how God has led. So if you'll look back more often, you'll have more confidence going forward.

God has led Belhaven University in remarkable ways – through our first fire in 1884 that burned our original campus to the ground shortly after we opened, all the way up through this current economic stress – Jesus, has led all the way.

## **2. COMMITMENT will prepare us**

On a campus, we work in an environment that is driven by regularly scheduled evaluation – student tests and papers, accrediting cycles, banking covenants, employee evaluations, enrollment and giving comparisons, teams taking to the field or court to test their preparedness to compete – in every aspect of what we do, we evaluate.

A commitment to evaluation is at the core of everything in University life. So wouldn't it make sense to also have a regularly scheduled evaluation to examine our personal spiritual life?

To follow closely behind Jesus we must have a commitment that enables us to leave our place of security. And in assuring that our commitment to Christ is refreshed, genuine, and ever deepening, we must be willing to examine it – just as we do everything else in academic life.

If we are to be people whom Jesus can use in significant ways, only an extraordinary commitment will prepare us. And we grow into that level of commitment only when we are willing to systematically examine our lives with genuine transparency.

Are you regularly examining if your commitment to God is progressively deepening, and if the quality of your spiritual life is growing so you can more fully reflect Christ to others? Or is what once was, all that is sustaining you?

I'm convinced the biggest threat to the Christian universities, ministries, missions is not from outside. But what will most likely weaken our work is jumping to the conclusion that working full time for a Christian organization that is all that's required to be a close follower of Jesus.

Or at even a more basic level – and this is the bare truth - just because you work in a Christian university doesn't make you personally right with the Lord.

In fact, working for a Christian organization could make your relationship with Jesus weaker because the devil can help justify that what you're doing for God excuses the lack of quality in your personal relationship with Christ.

Maybe the best way to start this school year, is to ask the questions of that old Mosie Lister Gospel song:

*How long has it been  
Since you talked with the Lord,  
And told Him your heart's hidden secrets?*

*How long since you prayed?  
How long since you stayed on your knees  
Till the light shone through?*

*How long has it been  
Since your mind felt at ease?  
How long since your heart knew no burden?*

*Can you call Him your friend?  
How long has it been  
Since you knew that He cared for you?*

If it's been too long, then tonight is the time to start to do something about it.

Are you closer to God right now, than when you were sitting in this same place a year ago tonight? If not, why not? And if so, why so?

The identifier on under our name, "Our Standard is Christ," guides us as a University. But that will only be as valid as each one of us applying it to our private, as well as our public-life.

We must be seeking after an ever-deepening relationship with Jesus that allows us to see the world through His eyes, and to be His hands and feet to minister to those students in our care – and to each other.

You see the Christian life is not simply choosing the correct answers on true/false tests, or a set of restrictive behavioral standards that we get right or wrong.

We would be missing so much of what God wants to do in our lives if that passing grade is all we desire.

Instead, to follow closely, Jesus calls us to transform how we think, what we value, and how we relate. He wants us to move out of the shallow-end of Christian living and into the deep end where we are totally dependant on Christ in order to live in the radical way He taught.

*One day as the crowds were gathering, Jesus went up the mountainside with his disciples and sat down to teach them. This is what he taught them:*

- *God blesses those who realize their need for him, for the Kingdom of Heaven is given to them.*
- *God blesses those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*
- *God blesses those who are gentle and lowly, for the whole earth will belong to them.*
- *God blesses those who are hungry and thirsty for justice, for they will receive it in full.*
- *God blesses those who are merciful, for they will be shown mercy.*
- *God blesses those whose hearts are pure, for they will see God.*
- *God blesses those who work for peace, for they will be called the children of God.*
- *God blesses those who are persecuted because they live for God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.*
- *God blesses you when you are mocked and persecuted and lied about because you are my followers.*

*Be happy about it! Be very glad! For a great reward awaits you in heaven.  
(Matthew 5:1-12)*

*“Then Simon Peter, who was the boldest among the disciples, raised his hand and asked, ‘will this be on the test?’*

*And Andrew inquired, ‘do we have to write this down?’ And James demanded to know, ‘does spelling count?’ And Philip asked, ‘if I leave early do I get counted off?’*

*Bartholomew questioned, ‘do we have to memorize all of this?’ And John reminded Jesus that, ‘the other disciples didn't have to learn this.’*

*And Judas wondered under his breath, 'what does this have to do with real life.' And the other disciples likewise.*

*Then the Scribes and Pharisees who was present asked to see Jesus' lesson plan, His terminal objectives in the cognitive domain, and a demonstration of the cultural sensitivity of His evaluation system.*

*Then Jesus wept.*

(Twenty years ago, after what must have been a somewhat less than satisfactory class session, one of the professors shared with me this newer translation of the Sermon on the Mount.)

When Jesus unwrapped these beatitudes for his disciples, He had no intention of giving them a new instruction booklet for life. He wasn't interested in laying out another group of marching orders to be memorized and followed without thinking, feeling, or internalizing.

The purpose of His life, His death, and His resurrection – along with the transforming message of His Sermon on the Mount – was not to provide us with a set of rules and procedures to lead us through the maze of all that life might bring our way.

Rather, Jesus came so that we could see our lives, the world, and eternity through the eyes of God.

To be a close follower of Jesus who is prepared to go wherever He will lead us, our commitment must be ever-growing in His worldview.

### **3. CALLING will compel us**

When we grasp, and start to live in confidence that the Lord truly will go before us, we each tend to breathe a deep sigh of relief, knowing that God really will protect me... and my family... and this University... and all that I care about.

That's true, but that's not the whole story.

You see, the way God goes before you and me, is that most often, He uses other people to be His hands and feet. So this promise, is not just about us having a bubble of protection around us, but it is about our calling to be used of God to go before others to make smooth the way for them.

And at Belhaven University, I think we do that in some remarkable ways that are unparalleled in most of Christian higher education.

In June, I was locked in another conference room for two days, but this one had windows and included our Administrative Team, the Directors of Admission and Integrated Marketing, and some incredibly gifted marketing consultants.

Our time together was for one simple task - to articulate exactly what Belhaven University does that distinguishes us from all other colleges and universities.

You'd think that assignment would be easy - but it wasn't. And fortunately, we had Liza Looser and the Cilot Agency, one of the country's top marketing firms, leading us through this analysis - a gift of their time given to Belhaven, worth far more than we could ever afford, had we hired their council like other clients for this analysis.

We were charged with distilling everything special about Belhaven into one or two words. If you had only one or two words to describe everything that is unique about us - what would you say?

I've suggested to you before that "Christ focused" would be those two words, and while true, we were quickly convinced in our session that those words didn't articulate what made us different from every other evangelical school.

Well, it may not be the perfect answer, but to summarize the nature of what distinguishes Belhaven University from all the other 4,168 schools in America we chose the words: "purposeful stewardship."

Not too catchy for a billboard is it? Yea, we didn't think so either, but it's the truth, and we'll find some good ways to explain it.

It comes down to this idea - **we have a drive and culture ingrained in Belhaven that seeks to get the best out of *everything* that God has given to us.** We are purposefully good stewards of whatever the Lord entrusts to us.

I want to unwrap this last point by sharing with you our mission in a way that God has been revealing it to me - in a way, that makes more sense out of this complex place, than anything I've considered before.

In fact, this outline I'm about to share with you has given me a fresh boldness for our future like I've never known during my 15 years here as president.

If we take all the complexities and distinctives of this University, and distill them into this core idea of “purposeful stewardship,” everything we do boils down into three critical stewardship callings given to us by God:

## **1. We have a calling to the stewardship of teaching an unchanging biblical worldview**

I wish I could tell you that every Christian university was like Belhaven when it came to a unified perspective of understanding and teaching of a biblically grounded worldview. But it's not.

And by God's grace, we've been given harmony rather than division, as well as intensity rather than dilution, when it comes to our compelling call to be good stewards of teaching a Christ-honoring worldview.

As I've watched the tragedy in the Gulf unfold the last four months, I am convinced that the long-term negative impact of this oil crisis in the Gulf is not going to be the oil that was spilled – but it's the chemical dilutants that have been added to our waters, that could have a toxic impact far beyond the damage from the oil.

And scientists are now predicting that when an oil mess is diluted like this, it enables the most dangerous portions of the oil to get imbedded in the environment for a very long time.

And that's kind of like what's happened to most Christian universities. Their waters were once clear and pristine. But when they got attacked for their faith and the waters got polluted, instead of just cleaning up the mess, they started to dilute their message so that the attacks would be more tolerable and easier to manage.

And in diluting to deal with the pollution, rather than cleaning up and protecting what they treasure, the damage from the attackers became imbedded and changed their environment forever.

From Harvard and Yale a century ago, to a host of modern examples, schools have slowly diluted their Christian worldview in order to counter when their biblical message is challenged. Or, a handful of fundamentalist schools have simply created their own waters that are cut off from the rest of the environment, so that their self-made lake can be kept artificially clean.

At Belhaven, God has allowed us to serve in the world, but not be of the world – understanding and reaching the culture, without running from it. And we have done

so only because we have been careful stewards of teaching an unchanging biblical worldview.

While we have a diverse student body from a variety of Church backgrounds and some with no spiritual foundation at all, our great strength as a University is found in our consistently majoring in the majors of faith:

- The uniqueness of Christ as the only way to the Father
- The justification by faith alone
- The authority and inerrancy of scripture
- The transforming power of the Holy Spirit
- The reality of eternal life to come.

Like the pillars that symbolize Belhaven near our fountain, these timeless pillars of what it means to be a follower of Jesus are unmovable at the center of our campus.

But coupled with this, we also are committed to a spirit of Christian grace that respects varying priorities within the array of evangelical thought and worship expression. So while being deeply committed to the majors of faith, we are also committed to a culture of grace when it comes to welcoming the breadth of God's people when there are differences among us in the minors of the Christian life.

In what matters most in faith, we don't budge. In what matters little we are accepting. Most Christian schools cannot do this, and Belhaven's unique outlook is a mission to be cherished.

Because of this stewardship of an unchanging biblical worldview and our balance to including the breadth of God's people, Belhaven University is a treasure among Christian higher education.

- We teach our students that God's Truth is absolute.
- We help them understand that the beliefs by which they live matter.
- We enable students to see God's sovereignty in every arena of life.
- We ground every aspect of our curriculum and campus activity in biblical principles.

That is Reformed higher education at it's finest.

We are not a "pray before class" Christian university, with a wholesome campus lifestyle, whose only integration of faith in the classroom or on the athletic field is to

have a short prayer at the beginning of each session, and then teach from the mainstream of secular thought.

Instead, everything we do has a depth of biblical understanding and activity that prepares in our students with a Christ-centered worldview that will enable them to stand up to the tests of life, rather than to be floundering in their faith as soon as they independently confront the culture.

There is no calling more important, no asset of this University to be more highly cherished, and no greater responsibility to hold, than to teach an unwavering biblical worldview and be purposeful stewards of that mission.

## **2. We have a calling to the stewardship of valuing every student.**

We have one of the most diverse student bodies of any University our size.

- We attract some incredibly bright and gifted students, and we have others who are under-prepared and lack motivation.
- We have lots of traditional age college students, and lots of adult students.
- We have students of a variety of races, cultures, economic backgrounds, and Church experience.
- We have students on seven physical campus, and online, going to class from early morning until late at night.

We must be crazy!

And you know what – most schools couldn't handle this responsibility. On other campuses:

- the faculty would desire we bring in only brilliant students.
- the coaches would only want us to take care of the young ones.
- the business office would tell us to only recruit the rich ones.
- those who believe in second chances would want only adult students.
- the innovators among us would only want the online students.
- the traditionalists in our midst would only want liberal arts majors.
- the sophisticated side of the campus would ask we only have the graduate students.
- and the residence life team would prefer only well-disciplined mature Christian homeschooled students who will go to bed at 10 o'clock.

But that's not God's calling for Belhaven University.

And as I sat in those two days of meetings dedicated to articulating our distinctive, "purposeful stewardship" was the only idea that resonated for how we work with such a complex student body.

This is what we do: we take every student – just where they are – and we invest in them to help get the most out of them. We don't just try to push students through a pre-designed program that makes it easy for us. Instead, we try to work with each one as a unique person whom God designed with special gifts, drive, and purpose.

Whether a student is the brightest and most capable student to come onto our campus, or the one who needs the most guidance and support, we are purposeful stewards of every student God has entrusted to us.

And don't ever forget, God didn't send any of them here by accident.

*Every student at Belhaven University came here because God hand-picked them to come here. And because they are a gift to us from God, we must be purposeful stewards of every single one of them.*

We have been considering a marketing campaign to turn "purposeful stewardship" into an idea that is easier to grasp. And the tag line we've looked at is "Beyond Your Best" because isn't that our desire for students, and isn't that what a Belhaven education is all about?

Every student comes to us with a set of expectations for doing their best academically, athletically, or artistically – as well as in their spiritual life, relationships, and career. But if all we do is help them achieve their goal, then we've not been good stewards in unlocking God's full desire for their lives – which is beyond the best they can envision.

At Belhaven, we have the faculty, coaches, and staff who are gifted to do just that in the life of every one of our students.

Jesus asked his closest followers, His disciples, this simple question: Do you love me? . . . and then gave them the answer. "If you love me," He said, "then take care of my sheep." John 21:16

So don't be a purposeful steward of every student to make me happy, to help our retention rate, or to prove to SACS we're a good school. Purposeful Stewardship is the calling of Jesus if we genuinely love him – and what a compelling calling it is.

God's compelling calling in our lives demands that we be purposeful stewards of every student as a one-of-a-kind gift from God. Jesus made it clear that if we love Him, then we must take care of his sheep.

### **3. We have a calling to the stewardship of honoring God-given opportunities.**

For those of you who were kind enough to act like you read my book, or at least have been around here since our Kickoff service in 2003, you've heard my concern that one of the core problems of the evangelical Church is that too often we've stopped trying to catch the wind of God in our sails because we've become fairly effective at creating our own independent power to get God's work done.

And even though our motors can propel us forward to do many good things in ministry, we will miss catching the wind of God when our motors are revved rather than our sails mended.

I summarized in the book this whole concept that has become the backbone of our outlook toward planning at Belhaven in these two sentences:

We need to be people who live, work, and relate to each other in such a way that we understand that the most impressive ministry powerboats we might develop, fade in comparison to the sailboat powered by God's wind.

And while we may feel proud when powerboats of ministry are big, well built, and polished, even a small, poorly crafted, and worn sailboat will outdistance a powerboat every time—because only the sailboat is able to catch the wind of God.

For over eight years now, our planning has been built around waiting for God's wind to blow, rather than traditional destination planning that attempts to predict where God wants us to go in the future.

Yes, we plan, but we do it locally, as close to every academic department, office, team, and function as possible – in order to be purposeful stewards of what God has already given us.

We do stewardship planning, instead of predicting a future in destination planning that wastefully consumes most schools, attempting to predict future outcomes that are often far beyond their control.

In other words, we want to plan to get the most out of what we already know, but past that, we trust God to bring us future opportunities as His wind blows and directs us. In fact, we've gotten now to the point where we plan for opportunities to come, even when we don't know what they are going to be – we keep the right team, budget, and schedule so that when God's wind blows, we are ready.

At one other conference this year, I spent time in deep dialog with some key international Church leaders who were wanting to understand the practical applications of Belhaven's distinctive sailboat vs. powerboat planning model.

In a quiet moment toward the end of that two-day meeting, when the agenda had been exhausted and the conversation stilled, one of the international leaders broke the silence and said to me, "you really expect God to bring you opportunities at Belhaven, don't you?"

I'd never thought about it that bluntly before, but yes, we do. We expect that God is going to bring us opportunities.

I believe most Christians, and most Christian ministries and universities, don't get opportunities for two reasons:

1. because they don't trust that God could take them beyond their gifts and strengths, and
2. because they have been poor stewards of the opportunities God has given to them.

At Belhaven, we continue to receive an abundance of opportunities because we have a proven track record of purposeful stewardship that honors every opportunity God brings to us.

When God's wind blew for us to take over Quest, the only reason we could move so quickly is because we have ingrained into our decision-making process this outlook.

I would argue that we can move faster on an opportunity than any non-profit university in America because we've prepared for opportunities by collecting the

right people, building the right corporate-culture, allocating the right resource balance, and holding fast to the right theology.

The funeral for Quest would have been long finished and the flowers wilted before any other school could have begun to act. And I especially applaud our faculty and our board, who in our decision making process, have rejected the cumbersome culture of higher education in order to be good stewards of God-given opportunities.

I love not having a long-range plan with six generic predictable goals developed over 18 months of endless meetings by a Blue Ribbon Committee. In fact, I spoke this summer about this concept of stewardship planning instead of destination planning out a conference of CCCU Adult Educators that Audrey Kelleher was helping to lead.

Well, at the end of my hour presentation, many who attended echoed to me privately the reaction of a faculty leader at a name-brand university who said, "I just got off the Blue Ribbon planning committee, and it was a total waste of time. I wish we could plan like Belhaven, but our faculty and board would never buy it."

Wouldn't it be terrible to limit our future at Belhaven to the goals we could predict? Wouldn't it even be worse to limit our future to a typical higher education process that is so grounded in mistrust that little can move forward?

People will often ask me, "what is the long-term vision for the University." And my answer is, "I have no idea . . . but because we are trusting God for opportunities, I know it will be far greater than the best idea we can imagine."

## **CONCLUSION**

This is a remarkable place, because we are purposeful stewards of an unchanging biblical worldview, of every student, and of our God-given opportunities.

What a great place to serve – and what a weighty responsibility.

Our collective prayer must be that those who come after us – 25, 50, or 100 years from now – will recount how they found us faithful purposeful stewards of this treasure God has created in Belhaven University.

Our verse of the year challenges us to be strong and courageous – not because of our ability, but because of who is going before us.

It isn't Roger Parrott going before us, or our Board of Trustees, or our Legacy of Learning faculty.

Our almighty God who has the power to create the heavens and the earth, and a universe far beyond our understanding, also created each one of us down to the smallest detail. That is who goes before us.

This summer, the Association for the Advancement of Science triggered a controversy by encouraging more purposeful dialog between the issues of science and faith. As you would guess, this initiative was challenged by this spiritually skeptical crowd, who are often hostile toward a Christian perspective. Many of them consider scientists who believe in God to be naïve at best.

But I was struck by the comment from a top astrophysicist who defended not separating faith and reason by saying, "I'm not religious because I'm ignorant. I'm religious because I'm in awe."

Might we be people who live in awe of the almighty creator God who leads us.

Belhaven University, "Be strong and courageous! ... The LORD your God will go ahead of you."