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Arnold D. Weigel

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Living Letters of Recommendation¹

Arnold Weigel

*Assistant Professor of Practical Theology/
Supervisor of Contextual Education,
Waterloo Lutheran Seminary, Waterloo*

Text: 2 Corinthians 3:2-3

On graduation day, my favourite humourist, Bill Cosby said:

You know, on the day of graduation, the ceremony pumped up all kinds of inner feelings. It was a very emotional thing. While I was working on the doctorate, I wasn't aware of its import, of what it meant to me. I was too wrapped up in the work. I loved the research and the writing of my dissertation. I truly had a love affair with the learning.

But it all passed without my feeling much of anything until graduation, until the speeches. Then I suddenly felt, 'This is it! I've done it!' I got all choked up.²

On graduation day, the spotlight of honour is appropriately on the graduate. This is a day of congratulations, of best wishes and of festivities. Achievements of note are recognized. Years of study and struggle are acknowledged. Learnings of importance are treasured. Memories are vividly recalled and enthusiastically shared. Visions are eagerly identified and keenly compared.

"Graduation ceremonies fulfil a very important function. Aside from being a mark of achievement for the graduates," claims educator Leo Buscaglia, "they are also an assurance to the society about to receive them that they have acquired certain basic skills."³

Recently as I browsed through the greeting cards for a potential graduate, my eyes caught one with a number of roses on its cover. That alone was sufficient to catch my attention. But the message in the card did so too. It read:

Congratulations, graduate!
 You will be known first
 by who you are and second
 by what you do!
 Let the message be one
 of good will
 in life and
 in deeds!

Our society, especially in this explosive information data-rich era, puts a premium on knowing. This is all well and good. But if knowing simply means a postponement of action, then such knowing is not doing justice to the very purpose of education. I realize that there is no agreement on what constitutes an educated person. I would contend, however, that the curriculum we prescribe needs to prepare us not only for knowledge in a complex and changing world, but also how to relate to other human beings and how to impact significantly on social systems so as to effect the betterment of society. Appropriately in *Bus 9 to Paradise*, Leo Buscaglia asks about the "educated graduate":

Have we done them justice if we've prepared them only to be skilled scientists, doctors, lawyers, teachers, engineers and computer experts? Will the education we've given them sustain them in an insecure economy, a world on the brink of annihilation, a society charged with intimidation, suspicion and uncertainty? If not, we may have presented them with a degree which will serve them for little."

"We will have been only half educated unless we have acquired survival techniques, a sense of human dignity and worth, an appreciation of life, the ability to give and receive love, the knowledge of how to use our limited time wisely, and the determination to leave the world a better place for our having been in it."⁴

We are not only graduates to be congratulated. We are living letters whose lives and deeds will be read by others in society. When I graduated from Waterloo Lutheran Seminary in 1965, I still recall the late J. Ray Houser saying: "As of this day, you'll be writing epistles not with pen or pencil, but with your lives. And those epistles will be read by many, who will judge us by what they read in you."

Graduation day is a day of honour to be sure. But graduation day is also a day in which we are reminded rather vividly that we will be judged in the world not so much by the grades which we have achieved, or the degree awarded, as we will by who we are and what we do in our living. How we use our acquired knowledge and wisdom and how creatively we respond

to opportunities for service—these are the things on which the world will judge us.

To date, we have come to know how letters of reference have been a required component of many a written application. Such letters of reference are submitted with the hope that they will furnish convincing evidence which will provide positive persuasion for those making the decision. Today, we don't have such a letter of reference. Today, on graduation day, we are brought face to face with the truth that we *are* such letters of reference. In fact, one of the selected lessons refers to us as being "letters of recommendation".

In 2 Corinthians 3:2-3 the Apostle Paul is being challenged to produce his credentials. His authenticity as an apostle is being questioned. His authority as a disciple of Christ is being brought under suspicion. I suppose in a real sense Paul is being asked to produce his degree—his letter of reference if you will. In Paul's day—and I suppose today as well—in most instances when such a request is made, the one being questioned scurries to produce the documents. The expectation is that you furnish the evidence which will lay to rest the questions and satisfy the questioners.

I can imagine the Apostle Paul being tempted to do so. After all, he was a person trained under the great master Gamaliel. Surprisingly though, Paul does not resort to such a tactic. On the contrary, Paul responds by returning the responsibility to the questioners. It is as though he says to the challengers: "I have few credentials to produce. In fact, if you want to know the truth, *the only real credentials that I have are you*. You are my living letters of recommendation. I have been preaching and teaching the need to make Christ the centre of all life and living. Well, the truth of the matter is that the way you live your life and respond to the lives of others will be a testimony to how seriously you take what I have been saying. You are my living letters of recommendation. I have no others."

I believe that the recipient of the 1986-87 outstanding teacher of the year award at Wilfrid Laurier University, Victor Martens, expressed similar sentiments when he said recently: "I've never been comfortable with the idea that you have to run around after recognition because I already feel very much

in the public eye through my students. In a very real and satisfying way their successes are mine too.”⁵

The Apostle Paul says: “You are my credentials. I really have no others. The testimony which you give is the basis on which others will judge my authenticity and my authority.”

We too have this identity. We too are living letters of recommendation. We are not simply repositories of knowledge. We are living letters of recommendation whose learning will be assessed on how creatively and constructively we relate with people, with systems, with life’s problems and situations.⁶

What Paul is emphasizing in this text is voiced with equal candor and concern by Charles Gerkin, a pastoral psychology professor; in his recent book *The Living Human Document*, Gerkin postulates—and I believe that he is right—that every human being, every person is a living human document whose life is at one and the same time a living testimony and a hidden truth to be explored and discovered. Every individual living human document has an integrity that calls for understanding and interpretation. The living human document needs to be accorded the same authority to speak that scholarship usually accords any literary text. Lived human experience has a profound complexity—a complexity which needs to be read, interpreted, understood and explored. We are living human documents. We are living letters of recommendation.⁷

I believe that we are so in a variety of ways. Today, I want to identify only two such realities.

As graduates of Wilfrid Laurier University, through its constituent departments and schools, we are living letters of recommendation for the institution granting us our degrees.

When we enrolled in this institution, we probably received literature which contained the stylized license plate—WLU4ME. Now that license plate will read: ME 4WLU. As of this day, you will be numbered among the alumni of this university. Wherever we go, whatever we do, however we conduct ourselves—all this we will do as graduates of WLU. Although included, this means more than making financial contributions to the Excellence in the Eighties Fund or the Seminary’s Endowment Fund. This means wearing the university’s colours with honour and distinction. We are living letters of recommendation for the university granting us a degree.

But there is more....

The Apostle Paul reminds us that we are living letters of recommendation for the faith that we hold. He is emphatic in noting that we are letters of reference for the God in whom we believe, the God whom we worship. Somewhere recently I read: "The god you worship will make you in his image within a decade. Within ten years you will be made into the image of your deity." I suppose such a claim is debatable. Nevertheless, it does substantiate the emphasis Paul wishes to make when he says: "And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered to us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts."

It is not that we become great through self-achievement; we become great when we bear witness to the God who has redeemed us through Christ Jesus. The 1979 Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* has these words in the celebrant's baptismal prayer: "Give them an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and to love you, and the gift of joy and wonder in all your works. Sustain them, O Lord, in your Holy Spirit, that they may lead godly lives until the day of Jesus Christ."⁸

This is what Paul has in mind when he speaks of us as living letters of recommendation—as living letters of reference for the values we hold, for the beliefs we treasure and for the relationships we prize. We are letters written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

A group of computer salesmen attended a regional sales conference in Toronto recently. They assured their families that they would be home in plenty of time for dinner. But with one thing or another, the meeting—as meetings are accustomed to do—ran overtime. In the end, the men had to run like crazy to make the train. As they barraged through the train terminal, one of them inadvertently kicked over a table supporting a basket of apples. Without stopping, they all kept running and just got to the train on time. They all boarded with a sigh of relief. Except one of them. He paused, got in touch with his feelings, and experienced a twinge of compunction for the boy whose applestand had been overturned. He waved goodbye to

his companions and returned to the terminal. He was glad he did. The ten year old boy attending the applestand was blind.

The salesman gathered up the apples and noticed that several of them were bruised. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a twenty-dollar bill. He said to the boy: "Here, please take this twenty dollars. I know it's not very much. But use it to buy yourself some more apples. I hope that I haven't spoiled your day."

As he started to walk away, the bewildered boy called after him: "Are you Jesus?"

He stopped in his tracks.

And he wondered: "Am I Jesus?"⁹

Are you Jesus? No! There is only one Jesus whom we call Christ for by God's grace he laid down his life for us. But God's spirit lives and works within us. We are living letters of recommendation. What a privilege! What a responsibility!

Congratulations graduate!

You will be known first

by who you are and second

by what you do!

Let the message be one

of good will

in life and

in deeds!

Notes

¹ Baccalaureate Sermon, Wilfrid Laurier University, 31 May 1987.

² Bill Adler, *The Cosby Wit: His Life and Humor* (New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, Inc., 1986) 92-93.

³ Leo Buscaglia, *Bus 9 to Paradise: A Loving Voyage* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1986) 173.

⁴ *Ibid.* 174-175.

⁵ *Kitchener-Waterloo Record*, 5 May 1987.

⁶ Cf. Carol Greene, *The Joy of Teaching Christ* (Philadelphia: Parish Life Press, 1982), especially Chapter 3, "The Art of Human Correspondence", 47-63.

⁷ Charles V. Gerkin, *The Living Human Document: Revisioning Pastoral Care in a Hermeneutical Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984).

⁸ *Anglican Book of Common Prayer* (1979), Celebrant's Prayer: Sacrament of Holy Baptism.

⁹ An adaptation of a story in Keith Miller and Bruce Larson, *The Edge of Adventure* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1974) 89-90 and William J. Bausch, *Storytelling: Imagination and Faith* (Mystic CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1984), 177-178.