

## COMMEMORATIVE ADDRESS: CELEBRATING TWENTY-FIVE YEARS OF GOD'S FAITHFULNESS†

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The year was 1986. Ronald Reagan was President. William Rehnquist became the Chief Justice of the United States. The dictator of the Philippines, Ferdinand Marcos, fled the country after twenty years of rule. There were some disturbing events that year, too. The Iran-Contra affair came to light, and, almost as disturbing, the Chicago Bears won the Super Bowl. Nineteen eighty-six was a huge year in the world of entertainment. Some of you may remember these movies coming out that year: *Top Gun* and *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*. Bobby Ewing came out of the shower alive, which meant that the prior season of the nation's top television show, *Dallas*, had all been a dream. The advertising campaign, "Pork, the other white meat," went viral that year. Of course, nothing literally went "viral" back then, but this was big in 1986.

More important for eternity, however, was that this law school first opened its doors in Virginia Beach in 1986. As Associate Dean Doug Cook and Judge Teresa Hammons have already shared this morning, the school opened its doors, but in many ways it was a continuation of a vision of the law school that began at Oral Roberts University before continuing here at Regent University.

Now, those of you who were here at that time or who know much about the early history of Regent Law School understand that the school was originally met with some skepticism. There were some who said, "There is no way you can have a Christian law school or at least a Christian law school that takes its faith seriously." "There is no way you are going to get it accredited by the American Bar Association." "You may have a Sunday school with a little smattering of the law, but there is no way that you are going to have excellence in that law school. You cannot recruit a top-notch faculty. You cannot have academic freedom. You simply cannot have what is needed for a Christian law school to be outstanding."

Here we are twenty-five years later, and I want to tell you that not only are we approved by the American Bar Association ("ABA"), but we have accomplished much more than that. We now have one of the

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highest bar passage rates in the Commonwealth of Virginia. We have an alumnus who is the governor of Virginia. We have nineteen alumni who are currently serving as judges and twenty-three who have served as judges overall. Regent graduates have won national ABA moot court and negotiation championships.

I want to assure you that it is possible for a law school to be thoroughly excellent and thoroughly Christian. And I want to join Judge Hammons in saying, "Praise God for His faithfulness." None of this would have happened but for the Lord and His call on the lives of the individuals who have come to study, to teach, and to serve at this law school. We are going to celebrate a lot of people throughout this day. We are also going to celebrate some milestone events that have taken place in the last twenty-five years. But we must not forget that all the glory goes to God for what has taken place in this law school.

I have the blessing to share a few thoughts this morning about where, by God's grace, we have come in the past twenty-five years as a law school and a few thoughts about where we may be going. I want to start with what I consider to be the unchanging foundation of this school. There are three commitments that I want you—especially those of you who came early in the history of this school—to know have not changed here. They have not wavered in the last twenty-five years at this law school, and by God's grace they never will.

The first commitment is to the mission of the law school, which has not changed since its earliest days at Oral Roberts University, to 1986, to today.<sup>1</sup> We believe that God has called men and women into the practice of law to serve Him as ministers of justice. Yes, like He calls pastors, missionaries, and others to go into specific fields of endeavor, He calls lawyers to serve Him as ministers of justice and, we believe, to serve in a certain way. They are to be outstanding. They are to be top-notch in what they do, but they are also to be men and women of

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<sup>1</sup> Over the years, the unique vision of this law school has been recorded and reflected upon in historic editions of the school's scholarly publications. In the first volume of the *Journal of Christian Jurisprudence*, Dean Charles A. Kothe described the founding and mission of the O.W. Coburn School of Law at Oral Roberts University. See Charles A. Kothe, *Preface*, 1 J. CHRISTIAN JURIS. 1, 1-3 (1980). As Dean Kothe explained in 1980, the vision from the very beginning was for "[n]ot just another law school" but one that would train students to "not only become technically competent lawyers with high ethical values but to learn how to integrate their Christian faith into their chosen profession." *Id.* at 1-2. Several years later, when the law school transferred to Virginia Beach, Virginia, Dean Herbert W. Titus made it clear that although the physical location of the law school had changed, the law school's mission remained true to its original purpose. See Herbert W. Titus, *Preface*, 6 J. CHRISTIAN JURIS. xvii, xvii-xviii (1987). Even when the law school's name was changed in the early 1990s to Regent University School of Law, the school again did not deviate from its unique philosophical premise of legal education grounded in biblical foundations. See Edwin Meese III, *Introduction*, 1 REGENT U. L. REV. 1, 2 (1991).

integrity, courage, and honor, who use their legal abilities to serve others.

Maybe you were like me listening to our 1988 alumnus, Judge Hammons, and to current first-year Regent law student, Leah Cornett, and thinking, “How amazing! How similar those stories are of the direct call of God to come here.” Stories like theirs are told every year. Those stories could have been told five years ago, or ten, or twenty, or even twenty-five years ago, because God is calling men and women to serve Him as lawyers and to be equipped for that task here. I will tell you how I first met Leah. I was spending time with a group of students who had served as part of a community service day in the Hampton Roads area. At the end of the community service in the morning, we sat down and ate pizza together under the trees here on campus. There was a group of about seven or eight of us, and somehow we started talking about how we each ended up at this law school. I was overwhelmed when I heard how God had brought these men and women here. Years ago, I had mistakenly told someone, “You know, I hope we get to the place someday where we stop hearing these quirky stories about how people come to Regent. I want people to know about this law school. Every Christian pre-law student ought to know about this place.” But now, I praise God for the quirky stories, for the God-ordained stories, and for the men and women who are called here through them.

In carrying out our mission, if God is calling people here, we need to train them with excellence and to thoroughly integrate faith and law into our curriculum. As part of our unchanging mission, we believe that God’s Word contains eternal principles of truth that speak to the law—what the law should look like and how one is to practice law.<sup>2</sup> For those who may be at all worried about whether we have veered from that foundational principle, I want to encourage you that we do not take this for granted. Indeed, we now have a training course for new faculty members who come to this school. When new professors start teaching at Regent, we do not just assume that they will do some biblical integration down the road. Instead, we train them using encouragement and examples from existing professors to ensure that we abide by these foundational principles for years to come, for the whole future of this law school.

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<sup>2</sup> See Kothe, *supra* note 1, at 3 (“We are committed to an educational philosophy that places God at the heart of our curriculum.”); Titus, *supra* note 1, at xvii (“[T]he law school curriculum rests upon a Biblical foundation. That foundation presupposes that God, the Creator of the Universe, impressed upon His creation an objective legal order that man is bound to obey. The study of law, therefore, involves the discovery of the principles of law, the communication of those principles, and the application of them to all of life. This view of law is the one espoused by the great common law scholars from Bracton to Blackstone.”).

The second commitment that has not changed and must not change is our commitment to excellence.<sup>3</sup> When I first came here to interview for a teaching job, I remember reading about the school from a prospectus that there were four red brick buildings on campus. So I was sort of picturing my old high school back in Waunakee, Wisconsin. As you might guess, I was pleasantly surprised when I arrived here on campus. What the buildings said to me was that Dr. Robertson, the trustees, and the founders of this university had decided that they were going to build a university that would last, where even the buildings in the way they are designed would communicate that things were to be done in the best way they possibly could be done. I have been so encouraged by how that principle has played out in the time I have been here—how one can see excellence in this school.

I am supremely thankful for my faculty colleagues. Every year we conduct exit interviews with those who are graduating from the law school about their experiences. The number one thing graduates love about this school, no matter what year, is the teaching of the faculty. They consistently report that the faculty teaches with excellence. I previously mentioned Regent's high bar passage rate. There was a time in the school's history when we did not talk much about the bar passage rate. Increasingly it became a major goal, and last year, our bar passage rate was 85.7% in Virginia and 87.2% nation-wide.<sup>4</sup>

I am praising God for what He has done in our programs and among our graduates who have gone out into law practice. You may know about our various championships: our moot court championships, our trial practice championships, and our negotiation championships. I was thinking back this morning before coming today about a conversation I had with one young man on one of our negotiation teams. His team won the ABA regional competition a couple of years ago and then advanced to the national competition. The team finished in the top eight but did not reach the finals. When he got back, I said, "Fantastic job! Congratulations!" but to my surprise he looked devastated. As I was talking with him, I realized that he fully expected to win that competition. Of course, he was thankful for how God had blessed the team and how well they had done, but I will tell you, he is not alone at

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<sup>3</sup> When United States Supreme Court Justice Byron R. White delivered his dedicatory address celebrating the opening of the O.W. Coburn School of Law in the fall of 1979, the Justice commented on his belief that this law school would be set apart by its commitment to excellence: "Any law school in [any one] of a thousand ways can develop an excellent and special character of its own and I know that this law school plans to do exactly that." Kothe, *supra* note 1, at 1–2.

<sup>4</sup> *Regent's Bar Passage Rates: 85.7% in Virginia and 87.2% Nationwide*, REGENT L. NEWS BLOG (June 28, 2011), <http://regentlawnews.blogspot.com/2011/06/regents-bar-passage-rates-857-in.html>.

Regent in his high expectations. When we send out teams now, they expect to win. They go out, and they expect to win through the power of God. Now, they may not win every time, but I would put our moot court, negotiation, and trial practice programs up against any programs in the country. I want to praise God for what He has done in those programs through the years. That is the second commitment: excellence.

The third commitment that has not changed and must not change at this law school is a heart to serve other people.<sup>5</sup> The law school's motto is: "Law is more than a profession. It's a calling." I really do not have to say much more than what Leah and Judge Hammons have already said about this principle. I am so proud of our alumni and what they have accomplished upon leaving this school. Some have gone into public service; some are serving in very high-profile places and are doing amazing things.

Still, some of you may be sitting here thinking, "I know we were supposed to be 'Christian Leaders to Change the World,' but I do not feel like a world-changer. I just have a traditional law practice. I do criminal defense work. I do family law. I work with people in bankruptcy. I am not changing the world." Yes, you are. I talk with many alumni and hear your stories about clients who are facing family crises or financial crises. These clients come to you with their lives in chaos, and you are not only giving them great legal advice, but equally important, you are also giving them spiritual advice. You are giving them business advice. You are giving them family counsel. You are talking to them as real people with real-life challenges. You are dealing with their problems from a Christian perspective. I want you to know that you are changing the world. You are changing the world one client at a time. I am so thankful for what you as our alumni are doing and for the services you are providing in our communities. Service to others is the third foundational commitment that must never change at this law school.

Now, that is not to say there have been no changes at the law school since its beginning. For one thing, every class has its uniqueness. The 1989 class came as a class of pioneers, just as Judge Hammons's 1988 class came as a class of pioneers. The 1989 class, though, had a particular activity that united them—a rather unusual class project, to sue the ABA. They lost that suit, but many of us believe that the

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<sup>5</sup> Oral Roberts, the visionary of the law school, once captured the school's mission in these remarks: "Law is basic to life. And whether laws are God's or man's, I believe they have a common purpose—to make man whole, to bring us together, and to give order and unity to our lives." Kothe, *supra* note 1, at 2. In the first volume of the *Journal of Christian Jurisprudence*, Dean Kothe likewise commented on the law school's goal of raising up students who have a heart to serve others through the legal profession: "Our first goal at the O.W. Coburn School of Law is to equip our students with the ability to bring God's healing power to reconcile individuals and to restore community wholeness." *Id.*

pressure and scrutiny that were put on the ABA helped to bring provisional accreditation very shortly afterward. On a lighter historical note, the 1997 class welcomed the “Weinermobile” to campus, which was awesome in its own right. Many in the class of 2004 did not see the Janet Jackson Super Bowl wardrobe malfunction because they were in the Atlantic Ocean at the time as part of the “February Freeze.” I must confess that I—in a less than sane moment—may have joined in that event. The 2009 class had the “Best Section Ever” and drafted the now-infamous petition to bring Internet access into the classroom. The ‘09 class then had the gall, as a class prank, to send an e-mail to 1Ls during their exam period stating that they had gone to the administration and said, “We were wrong. Take out the Internet access and remove it for all future classes.” The class of 2009, a class I love deeply.

I would say there are two major changes that have occurred since the founding of this school. First, I think that we are doing more clinical education and more hands-on experiential learning than we have ever done before. We have always had great trial practice training, negotiation training, and appellate advocacy training, but we also now have a legal clinic that is doing great work to help men and women who are impoverished or just struggling with life’s challenges. We also have outstanding practicums. Professor Randy Singer, one of the great civil litigators in our area, offers a civil litigation practicum in which our students can work and learn alongside him in his practice. We have a practicum with Professor Bruce Cameron on labor law. This spring, we will have a practicum on immigration law in which students will work alongside alumnus Hugo Valverde on asylum cases, helping to bring people to the United States who have been persecuted for their faith overseas. It has been encouraging to see the amount of hands-on opportunities that our students have available to them.

The second major change is the growth in our international programs. It has become obvious that when God led our leaders to the university’s motto: “Christian Leadership to Change the World,” He did not mean just America. He meant the entire world. And so today, if you are a student at this law school, you have a chance to spend a summer abroad in Strasbourg, France or Israel. You have the opportunity to do an entire semester abroad in China, Korea, or Spain. We have also started a Center for Global Justice. If you talk with today’s students, you will discover that many of them have come to this law school because they want to make a difference in the lives of the oppressed, the abused, and the enslaved around the world. God is opening doors for them to be equipped for that work through studying here at Regent.

So, as we look toward the next twenty-five years, I want to share with you, as alumni, where we are headed and two ways we need your help. The first relates to the Center for Global Justice that I just

mentioned. I encourage you to talk with our current students while you are here today. Why did they come to this school? What is God putting on their hearts? So many of them have heard about the number of women and children who are bought and sold today, about the tens of millions of children who are left without parents, and about the thousands of children who are used as soldiers in Africa. Our students hear about those things, and they are motivated not only to pray or to make a financial gift, but to go and do. And so, the Center for Global Justice is our effort to equip these men and women to do this work that has the power to change the lives of men and women all around the world.

Faculty members are also going to be very involved in the work of the Center. We have been contacted by several universities in Africa who want to start Christian law schools. They know that the biggest challenges they face are the shortcomings in applying the rule of law. Their governments struggle with corruption. They lack transparency. Appropriate laws may exist, but they are not being enforced. One of the responses is to train leaders for the next generation in Africa. I think that this school should come alongside to support those who want to start Christian law schools. We already have faculty members who are ready to go, to begin some of the training, to assist them in starting schools like Regent in Africa, to train men and women who will bring a Christian perspective and the rule of law to their countries. But there are only twenty-eight of us on the faculty. If we are going to come alongside schools there and to do training there, we are going to need alumni to join us. I want you to think about legal mission trips in the years to come, faculty and alumni together. I believe God is going to open doors and lead in that direction.

Second, you may have heard that there is much discussion today about legal education—what is working and what is not working. An extensive study done in 2007 by the Carnegie Foundation essentially reported that legal education is great in certain ways.<sup>6</sup> It teaches students to think analytically—to think like a lawyer—and it teaches them a lot about the substantive law.<sup>7</sup> But Carnegie also concluded that law schools were not doing other things well. As a whole, we are not training students very well in lawyering skills, and we are not training them in what the Carnegie report calls “professional identity.”<sup>8</sup>

What are lawyers about? What is their purpose? What is the profession meant to do? Is it just to serve ourselves? Is it just a business?

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<sup>6</sup> WILLIAM M. SULLIVAN ET AL., *EDUCATING LAWYERS: PREPARATION FOR THE PROFESSION OF LAW* (2007).

<sup>7</sup> *Id.* at 185–86.

<sup>8</sup> *Id.* at 126–28.

Or, is there a moral basis and a purpose for the law? Some of our faculty members, like Professor Ben Madison and Associate Dean Natt Gantt, are taking the lead in responding to Carnegie's professional identity challenge. They are able to present the legal academy with elements of the Regent Model where the training does not just involve academics, but also emphasizes skills training and above all character training. As I evaluate our training in this area, we have done a good job of integrating faith into the substance of the law that we teach, but we need to go even further in integrating faith into day-to-day practice for Christian lawyers. We are going to be spending more time on this issue as professors. But we need you, our alumni, to be involved. You are on the ground. You are making decisions every day about how your faith applies to the day-to-day work of Christian lawyers. This needs to be a partnership between Regent alumni and professors as we move forward in this area.

I hope you are encouraged. I know I am. Every day I come to work, and although this job has its share of challenges and struggles like any other job, I look around as Dean and think, "Thank you God for bringing me here. Thank you God for bringing these students that I am honored to teach, spend time with, encourage, and be encouraged by." I want you to be encouraged today. Thank you very much.