



To Whom Much Has Been Given . . .

Opening Convocation Address

Philip W. Eaton, President

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I've had a chance over the last couple of weeks to speak to the student leaders and to the faculty, staff, and trustees and to the student athletes and the Ames Scholars and the new students and the parents of new students and on and on. I want you to know I am tired of hearing my own voice. And I am sure some of you are tired of hearing my voice too.

By the way, I believe in doing openings well. I think the launching of the academic year is a very special time and so many people work hard to make sure this is a good and important time for the new and returning members of our campus. And, by the way, I want to welcome back all of our returning students, who just arrived on Sunday afternoon. You are the only ones who have not been welcomed yet. These beginning rituals and events and retreats give us a chance to renew our sense of purpose and set a tone and direction for the year to come.

But I also believe we have *to end the beginnings at some point* and get down to the business at hand. And so at the end of this hour, I will declare all new beginnings are over.

One more word on beginnings, though: I can't believe the energy on campus at the beginning of this year. As I said at the State of the University Address: something is happening. Do you feel it? The student leaders are charged for a good year. The athletes are off to an outstanding new season. The faculty had a great retreat presenting and reflecting on the amazing things going on all over campus. We seem to be pulling in the same direction. There seems to be some kind of culmination, some kind of convergence of efforts. And I am very grateful for all of this as we begin another year.

I want to reflect for a few moments together about our purpose as a Christian university. I want to think about what it means to be a premier, national Christian university, the language we are shaping for the *Blueprint for Excellence*. I ask the students to listen in on this conversation this morning. I would love to hear any response you might have.

These remarks are in some ways a continuation of my State of the University Address last week. The big point I wanted to make in that address is that we have actually finished most of the strategic plan we put together eight years ago. It is time now to draft a blueprint for the future. As Stamatis Vokos said after the address, it is as if we are all pushing now in the same direction. And the question is where do we go from here?

And here's the spirit I am assuming as we look to the future: I want us to think boldly about what we can accomplish together. I think we are in a place to think boldly. I believe we are ready—guided by a compelling, clear, and steady vision, and standing on the foundations of all we have accomplished together—I think we are ready to build a premier, national Christian university.

Eleven years ago Sharon and I visited Seattle Pacific to talk about whether I was the one to assume an open position here. Seattle Pacific was sizing me up, and we were deciding whether we were being called in new directions for our lives. We were coming from Phoenix, and I remember walking out of one interview, walking up the hill on 6th toward my rental car, and it was raining. Really raining. And of course we didn't own an umbrella. I had to take my suit to an overnight cleaners, and I thought, really, is God

calling me to this place?

But I remember very clearly, in one of the interviews, Mark Walhout asked me what Christian college or university I thought was a model for SPU. His question contained an assumption that we had a lot of work to do, and there were so many other institutions far ahead of us. I knew he had his favorites (like Calvin and Wheaton), and I had a lot of experience at Whitworth, so I had my favorite too.

But my instincts then are just as they are now—while we could learn a great deal from so many others, I wasn't interested in following anyone. I wanted us to become truly who we are, what God has called us to be. I wanted a vision coming out of our heritage, our people, our distinctives. And I wanted us to be a leader, defining what Christian higher education ought to be about and not just following.

I was asked by the publisher Eerdmans this summer if I would read Duane Litfin's manuscript on Christian higher education. Duane is the president of Wheaton College and a good friend of mine. In his book, he outlines with great clarity and passion what he calls Christ-centered education. Duane and I have been on several panels together discussing, often debating, this notion of Christian higher education.

But I came away from Duane's book thinking there is a basic assumption here that we are all aspiring to be like Wheaton, that we see ourselves as little Wheatons, that our theological assumptions are the same, that we are all carrying out the same mission (without as much endowment, I might add). All the way through I kept saying, no, no, we are quite clearly distinctive from this. We are not like Wheaton, and we don't aspire to be.

And then I have been watching the Baylor story with great interest. I studied their 2012 vision statement with care this summer. Their plan is bold, and it is big, and I like that a lot. "A Protestant Notre Dame," they say. I might add, however, that most of the boldness of this plan lies in the outrageous notion that Baylor is trying to reclaim its Christian identity. What a gutsy, courageous move. The jury is still out at this moment, by the way. The president just may lose his job, and the institution may yet turn back on this grand reclamation project. I have written a letter to Robert Sloan, by the way, and I am praying for him.

But I come away from Duane's book and the Baylor vision thinking that we need Baylor's boldness and we certainly need Wheaton's endowment, but we need to be precisely what God calls this university to become. That's what we are trying to define with this Blueprint work. Let's be bold. Let's unleash a bold imagination. But let's be just who we are called to be. Let us discover, define, and declare our distinctives.

I have been reflecting on that passage from Luke where Jesus says "From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded."

In my reflections over the last months, I suddenly discovered that we are up against an accountability factor as we cast our vision for the future. We have been given much. We have accomplished much together. We have been entrusted with much. And now we have to think hard about what is required of us. What are we going to do with what we have been given?

To whom much has been given. . . . What have we been given?

In the State of the University Address I took great delight in laying out the truly extraordinary accomplishments going on all over campus. Guided by a coherent vision, and doing our work in the spirit of genuine community, and building an amazing team of folks—it is happening. We are doing the work of a premier Christian university, and we are indeed broadening the base nationally.

But I have also been reflecting on what some of those deeper distinctives might be. To whom much has been given. . . . Well, what have we been given?

We have been given a radical view of the world. We believe that God loves his world. We believe that God loves all of his children. What an extraordinary starting point for a learning community. What a profound assumption on which to construct a curriculum or a course or an article or book or indeed a university. We believe that Jesus is the light of the world and that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness will never overcome it. What an astounding thing in this world of ours: we have been given a vision of hope. As we craft our plans for the future, we need to ask: what then is required of us with this radical view of the world?

We have been given a radical way of doing our business. We decided some time ago that we will work together as a community full of grace. Sometimes I stop and think what a privilege it is to work and live in community, a community full of grace, captured by a common vision, enlivened by the spirit, where we treat each other with kindness and courtesy and respect? This is huge. And so what is required of us because we are blessed by genuine community?

We have been given the tools to learn. What an extraordinary gift that we all love learning, and that we are trying to pass on that love to another generation. We have worked hard to master these tools. How then should we use the tools of learning? We could, by the way, use them destructively, arrogantly. And so we must ask: what then is required of us because we have been given the tools to learn?

We have been given material blessings beyond imagination. As I said in the State of the University Address, this is an area we must tackle for the future. Quite simply we must change the paradigm of our resources in order to become a premier, national Christian university. But our budget is huge compared to most Christian institutions. We have assembled an amazing package of facilities. And people are giving us money in record numbers. Do you realize what a responsibility I feel when people give us money and when parents and students pay their tuition? Something big time is required of me and required of us all to deliver. And I ask about all of our material blessings in this place: what then is required of us?

To whom much has been given. . . . We have been given a radical vision for the world. We have been given a radical way of doing our work. We have been given this amazing love of learning. And we have been given material blessings beyond our dreams. Now what are we going to do with all of this? We have worked hard to put all of these distinctives in place. Now what is required of us for the future?

I have been thinking hard about all of these questions. And I have been in conversation with so many of you across the campus and will continue that conversation.

But I don't think our task is to follow the Wheaton model or the Baylor model or anyone else's model. I think we have to keep thinking deeply about our distinctive vision that emerges out of our distinctive heritage. And I think we have to keep thinking about the distinctive accomplishments that emerge out of the work of our team, in this place, at this time.

And then let's boldly cast a new and renewed vision for the future for Seattle Pacific University.

Let this be a place that gets into the mix of what's going on in the world. That's what our vision requires of us. Let us be engaged, relevant, and active in the world. Let us never indulge in fundamentalist separatism or academic separatism.

And let us ground ourselves in the scriptures. As students and faculty and staff, let us grow theologically. What is required of us is to put our own story as an institution into

the context of God's big story for his world and for all of his children.

Let us believe that we can truly make a difference as a Christian university. Given a radical vision of the world and the tools of learning, we can make a difference. Let us assume a posture of confidence, not arrogance, not competitiveness, but confidence that learning leads to impact and influence for good. Let us distinguish ourselves as a learning community, sharpening our understanding of how people learn, and then let us know better all the time how to use that learning for good.

What an amazing opportunity we have at this moment at Seattle Pacific University. I look forward to the conversation ahead. I look forward to hearing from you. I look forward to crafting this vision and this plan for the future.

To whom much has been given—so much will be required of us.

