VOCATION AS SANCTIFICATION:

Some Thoughts as I Accept the Call to Become the Next Chancellor of
Reformed Theological Seminary

“May God be gracious to us and bless us, and make His face shine upon us, that Your ways may be known on earth, your salvation among all nations” (Psalm 67.1-2 ESV).

“Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers” (1 Timothy 4.16 ESV).

A Prayer in Acceptance of a Call

“O loving heavenly Father, whose blessed Son did suffer for the whole world, grant that we may know you better, love you more, and serve you with a more perfect will. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever. Amen.” - From Thursdays Lauds, Week Three, The prayer for the Day, September 2nd, 2010, on which I was called to become the Chancellor of Reformed Theological Seminary.[1]

The Humbling Experience of Calling

I tell our students that “your vocation is your sanctification,” that is, that in the ordinary/extraordinary life of following our Master, the Lord Jesus Christ, we continually discover that we are not our own, that we are being led by His Spirit to places we would never have imagined to have gone on our own:

“Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go” (John 21.18).

In this process of following Him, we are so often driven to our knees in desperate prayer, “Lord, I didn’t expect to go this way! I had plans to follow Thee in this way!” Yet in the perpetual response to His loving, but often, strong arm on our shoulder to go this way and not that way, as St. Paul was forbidden to go to Asia but to turn to Europe (Acts 16.6), we are gently and sometimes severely reminded that our Savior Himself modeled perfect Sonship in His obedience to the Father:

“So Jesus said to them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father
So, too, we, the little preachers of Jesus, particularly those ordained as evangelists, as I was so long ago now, [2] go as we are led by His Spirit, waiting on Him, seeking Him, listening out for Him, watching providential doors opening and shutting, and being reminded that we are not our own but have been bought with a price; [3] that we are but itinerants dispatched under the command of Christ as He fulfills His purposes in the world. Then as we conduct our ministries, as we “persist” in our personal devotional life with Jesus Christ and our “teaching,” we shall “save” our “hearers” and ourselves (1 Timothy 4.16). Thus, our “vocation becomes sanctification.”

So, as I would never have imagined a “career trajectory” that would have led me to be called as president of a seminary, I would have never dreamed, when I was called to preach, that I would be one day called to become the chancellor of Reformed Theological Seminary. Yet there remains no doubt in our minds or apparently the minds of our current esteemed chancellor, my friend Dr. Ric Cannada, the Chairman of the Board of Trustees, Mr. Jim Moore, and the executive committee of the RTS Board of Trustees, that, in fact, a door has been opened by the Lord and a call has been extended to me to walk through that door as the chancellor-elect. This action, on September 2nd, witnessed by my wife, who was at my side, is now received in much astonishment, earnest humility, prayerful pleas for strength and wisdom, and awareness of the costs (at least those who know about) of following Christ in this way. Yet in joy, in love of the vision and mission of this movement of Christ in our generation called RTS we do accept this call as from the Lord. We do accept this assignment as the place where He has placed us. We claim no other credentials for this assignment other than His call. I pray that we shall recall His hand on our shoulders, moving us in this direction, and the series of undeniable open doors of ministry, as we move forward. The details of our transition are before the world in the Chancellor Transition Plan and the press release (both available at the RTS website). Our goal in the transition is to glorify God and to model a healthy transition before the Church, not for the self-aggrandizing purpose of showing our adroitness in such matters, but to pastorally seek God’s help to encourage others in their own transitions of ministry and senior leadership/servanthood to Gospel ministries.

Thus in all of this my vocation has become my sanctification. And in all of this I would, as ministers must do, desire to open my life as an open book, warts and all, to the world. That in my walk with Christ I have become increasingly aware of His ownership of my life, and my simple guiding principles for ministry and my plain vision for our work: a burden that I and our seminary must remain unswervingly committed to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, for His burden for total redemption of His Creation through His Son Jesus Christ, grounded by the unchanging values of the Great Commission, the inerrant and infallible Word of the living God, and the doctrines of grace recovered and articulated so well in the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms, that is, the Reformed Faith, as the very doctrines of Christ Jesus Himself, and a burning passion to give our lives and ministry away to the singular goal of Jesus’ Great Commission to make disciples, baptize them and teach them to obey His Gospel. My own heart beats for
two great things in life: to revitalize the “things that remain” in the old Christendom—in North America as well as in Britain and Western Europe—and to equip pastors and other Christian leaders in the revival-rich nations of the South and the East, the “next Christendom.” Thus, through issue the call for more laborers for God’s harvest, and equipping the saints for ministry, and through the ordinary means of grace—Word, Sacrament and Prayer—we aim to raise up a new generation of pastors and missionaries and other servants of Christ to fulfill this glorious vision.

In all of this, then, God is shaping my life, conforming it to His. I am learning, still, that when he does that it touches others—my family, our faculty and staff, our students, our alumni, our wonderful sister seminaries who share our identical burden, value, vision and mission (and who often do better than we do at so many of these goals and from whom I would hope to learn, in order to join them, shoulder to shoulder in the “battle”). I am reminded that we must honor the past before we build for the future. And so through our joint leadership I aim to encourage the honoring of my friends Ric and Rachel Cannada, and to recall the ministry of Dr. Luder Whitlock, and the founding evangelistic work of Sam Patterson. I would desire to lift up the laymen who gave their years and lives and resources to build up this seminary. I want to spend my transition time in honoring the outstanding presidents and their campuses, our faculty of over 50 pastor-scholars, our staff, our 3,000 students, and our 8,000 plus (and growing) alumni, and the millions of “students” who are now being ministered to through iTunes U and our Virtual Campus. There are village pastors in India, housewives in Maine, and homeschooled missionary children in Bulgaria, who are listening to Dr. Doug Kelly, or Dr. Howard Griffith or Dr. John Frame or Dr. Derek Thomas or another of our gifted, beloved pastor-professors.

I desire to serve you all in the spirit of our Lord who served us with His life. I plead for your prayers to do so. My heart is full as I write these words, that they may be fulfilled in personal, pastoral ways. “Grant me that open door, too, Lord. Let them know of my prayers, let them know of my desire to build them up in Christ, through my support, so that they can do their work well.”

So, then, my heart and mind are set on a transition program of “listening, learning and loving”—the “3 ‘L’s’ that I instruct my students to follow in transition themselves. In doing this, Mae and John Michael and I are learning, again, our dependence on God as we pray the Psalm:

“Have mercy on me O Lord, for I call to you all day long; Bring joy to Your servant, for to you, O LORD, I lift up my soul” (Psalm 86.3,4).

I thank Dr. Cannada for his confidence in me, hopefully justified as God establishes this transition, and I thank Mr. Moore, our beloved Chairman and my father in Christ, as well as each member of the executive committee and the RTS Board of Trustees. I accept the call. I realize that God is at work in using a filthy sinner saved by grace, called to preach the unsearchable riches of Christ that he once blasphemed, to serve a great ministry movement of God in our generation: Reformed Theological Seminary.
I can think of no greater prayer to close this little acceptance epistle than the prayer of David:

“May God be gracious to us and bless us, and make His face shine upon us, that Your ways may be known on earth, your salvation among all nations” (Psalm 67.1-2 ESV).

So let this seminary with “a mind for truth and a heart for God” go onward and forward into the future with the same vision and mission that was received from God in prayer on the first day it was founded.


[2] In the Heartland Presbytery of the Presbyterian Church in America.