

Address to Romanian Graduates:

Institute of Pentecostal Theology in Bucharest

Today I have the privilege of address the graduating class of one of Europe's premiere Pentecostal seminaries. I am looking a cohort – a new generation of ministers being sent into the harvest.

The challenge for the new generation of ministers – and for the church today is the increasingly affluent **Postmodernism**. On one hand, we see an increasing openness to spirituality in comparison to the decades before us, but at the same time we are having more difficulties in reaching people with the gospel of Christ and bringing them into any effective discipleship.

Sometimes recognizing a problem requires finding the right words to name it. **Christian Smith** and **Melinda Lundquist Denton** have coined a phrase that describes perfectly the dominant American religion: **Moralistic Therapeutic Deism**. They claim that it is de fact the fastest growing religion in the United States. No one claims the title of being a moralistic therapeutic deist. But there are many people who hold to the following tenets.

1. A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when He is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.

Moralism

First, consider how many TV sermons, and teachings are nothing but moralism. MTD believes that central to living a good and happy life is being a good, moral person. But just what does being moral mean? It usually is interpreted to mean:

- be nice, kind, pleasant, respectful, and responsible;
- be tolerant of everyone and their personal opinions;
- work on self-improvement;
- take care of one's health; and
- do one's best to be successful.

The common assumption is that being good is easy, just a matter of knowing what one should do and trying harder. The biblical truth that bad behavior is a manifestation of sin, a depravity that inheres in our fallen nature, is skimmed over. And so is the solution to sin: a life-changing faith in Jesus Christ.

Being moral in this faith means being the kind of person who other people will like, fulfilling one's personal potential, and not being socially disruptive or interpersonally obnoxious.

Therapeutic

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is also about providing therapeutic benefits to its adherents. This is not a religion ...

- of repentance from sin,
- of keeping the any commandments in the Bible,
- of living as a servant of a sovereign God,
- of living in submission to the lordship of Christ
- of steadfastly saying one's prayers,
- of building character through suffering,
- of basking in God's love and grace,
- of spending oneself in gratitude and love for the cause of social justice, etc.

Rather, this religion is centrally about feeling good, happy, secure, and at peace.

It is about

- attaining subjective well-being,
- being able to resolve problems, and
- getting along amiably with other people.

Many Christian publications, sermons, and teachings are primarily therapeutic. And while it is true that Christ can solve many of our problems, much that passes for Christian teaching says nothing about Christ. Instead, it consists of pop psychology, self-help platitudes, and the power of positive thinking.

It is thus no wonder that so many people are becoming more open to spirituality. For the faith many of them have in mind effectively helps to achieve a primary life goal: to feel good and happy about oneself and one's life. It is also no wonder that many Christians are so religiously inarticulate. As long as one is happy, why bother with being able to talk about the content of one's faith?

Deism

Finally, Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is about belief in a particular kind of God, one who exists, created the world, and defines our general moral order, but not one who is particularly personally involved in our affairs—especially affairs in which we would prefer not to have God involved.

Most of the time, the God of this faith keeps a safe distance. He is often described as “watching over everything from above” and “the creator of everything and is just up there now controlling everything.”

For many people, God sometimes does get involved in their lives, but usually only when they call upon him, which is usually when they have some trouble or problem or bad feeling that they want resolved.

They talk about God in a generic way, but say nothing about the Father, who created and still sustains the world; the Son, who became Incarnate in this world to win our salvation; and the Holy Spirit, who works through the Word of God to bring us to faith.

The God of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism

- is not Trinitarian,
- did not speak through the Torah or the prophets of Israel,
- was never resurrected from the dead, and
- does not fill and transform people through his Spirit.

This God is not demanding. He actually can't be, since his job is to solve our problems and make people feel good. In short, God is something like a combination Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist

- he is always on call,
- takes care of any problems that arise,
- helps his people to feel better about themselves, and
- does not become too personally involved in the process.

It kind of reminds me of my teenage kids (in puberty).

They have an attitude of "Get out of my life, but can I have 10 Euros?"

This God, being distant, does not directly verbally answer prayers, but he also does not offer any challenging comebacks to or arguments about our requests. Perhaps the worst the God of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism can do is to simply fail to provide his promised therapeutic blessings, in which case those who believe in him are entitled to be grumpy.

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism exists, with God's aid, to help people succeed in life, to make them feel good, and to help them get along with others—who otherwise are different—in school, at work, on the team, and in other routine areas of life.

Christianity is

not about _____ but it is about _____

- **Moralism** – based on the goodness of man striving to be even better at being good
- **Grace** – based on the holiness of God and the fallenness / depravity of humanity

For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23)

- **Therapy** - making people feel better about themselves
- **Changing lives** – through the transformative power Spirit of the risen Christ who is at work and lives in you.
- Romans 8:11 And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you.

- **Deism** – God is not an uninvolved deity
 - o Grandfather
 - o Heavenly Cheerleader
- God, who became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14).
- For we do not have a God who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are-- yet was without sin. (Heb 4:15)

Since we know what the challenge is, the question is, "How are we going to get there?"

Top Ten Tips to Graduates

1. Don't litter.

We are stewards of God's creation. He has entrusted it with us. And how we treat the earth is also a reflection of how we respect God and his commands.

God was the first to come up with the idea of recycling. From dust we came from dust and to dust we return.

2. Practice good manners and good taste

Ephesians 4:29 says, "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen."

Vulgarity and crudeness reveal one's own vast sense of inferiority. Such things have no place in a graduate from this fine school.

3. Learn to deal with conflict instead of avoiding it.

Every time we give in and avoid conflict; there is a price to be paid. Conflict is an evitable part of life. Learn how to work through it and manage it. Wrestle with it as Jacob did with the angel of long ago until the conflict gives you a blessing. After it was over, Jacob said, "this is holy ground and I didn't even know it."

4. Learn to spell if you don't know how.

Spell check is not like the Holy Spirit. It is not going to be with you all the time. Your writing style reflects your discipline and ability to concretely formulate your thoughts. And if anyone reads what you write, it will be a reflection of your ministry, and even of this school from which are you are graduating.

5. Put your computers and iPhones down from time to time and learn something.

Be aware of letting technology be a substitute for learning. Every once in a while pick up a book and read. Read! Read from a wide variety of fields. Work the new found knowledge into your conversations.

Keep up with current affairs. What is happening in the economy in Greece, the tragedy in the Gulf of Mexico, and the economic pressures facing the Euro zone may affect you and your local church and community.

Be careful when the Internet is your only source for sermon preparation.

6. Remember: You can't understand if you don't know the language.

Teach yourself how to understand people who think differently. This exercise will help you sharpen your own ideas while treating differing views with more empathy.

As a minister, "always be prepared to give an answer to anyone who has a question about the hope that is within you because of Jesus Christ. But do it with gentleness and respect so that even your enemies will speak well of you." (1 Peter 3).

7. Learn to laugh and don't take yourself too seriously.

To make mistakes is human; to stumble is common; to be able to laugh at yourself is maturity. Laugh at yourself, but don't ever aim your doubt at yourself.

Surround yourself with people who take their work seriously, but not themselves.

A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a broken spirit saps a person's strength. (Prov 17:22)

8. Be extremely careful who you marry.

Don't marry a narcissistic personality – you'll only be busy making someone else happy. On the other hand, don't be paralyzed by being afraid of making a commitment. And when you get married, make it work.

Calling – make sure your spouse shares your calling! Many a minister has been held back in his ministry because his wife did not support him in his ministry.

9. Get off the bench / sidelines and use what you've learned.

Soccer – we fans know how to do everything better than the players and coaches at the WM. Stop the complaining and get into the game. You have been educated to get into the game of life. Don't fritter away your chances.

10. Remember: Who is your audience?

The need for approval plagues some spiritual leaders. If the need for approval drives the leader's activity, then the leader becomes too available, too responsive. In order to hear, "I don't know what we would do without you," the leader makes all sorts of irrational decisions, denying the needs for leisure, rest, and family and becoming hooded on the need to be needed. One symptom – the ministry system becomes too dependent on the leader for operation.

Some people put a parent in the audience, particularly if the parental blessing has been withheld. Many church leaders place their ministry constituents in the audience – and there is a need to seek approval from your audience. Other people who might be in your audience include:

- Mentors
- professors
- district superintendents
- fellow Christian leaders whose opinion matters

When this happens, the calling falls prisoner to those who these leaders have disappointed or bruised. The unrelenting sense of failure haunts them and finally takes them out of the running.

There is an Audience of One that the Christian leader must cultivate. Only His approval assuages insignificance and loneliness and feelings of failure. Only He keeps the perfect score. His "well done, my good and faithful servant" will make every effort worth it. (Mt 25: 21, 23)

Who is in your audience?

Closing Prayer

Philippians 1

9-11 So this is my prayer: that your love will flourish and that you will not only love much but well. Learn to love appropriately. You need to use your head and test your feelings so that your love is sincere and intelligent, not sentimental gush. Live a lover's life, circumspect and exemplary, a life Jesus will be proud of: bountiful in fruits from the soul, making Jesus Christ attractive to all, getting everyone involved in the glory and praise of God.

Phiippians 4

6-7 Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns. Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down. It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life.

23 Receive and experience the amazing grace of the Master, Jesus Christ, deep, deep within yourselves.

References

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