

Commencement: An Alternative to Graduation

Sometimes children pay the price for the counter-cultural lifestyle of their parents. Early on in our home education adventure our little non-schoolers had to get used to answering questions like, “Why aren’t you in school today?” Though in those days (when homeschooling was a novelty) fabrications like “teachers meeting” were a tempting response in order to avoid penetrating stares, nowadays the children respond with a nonchalant “We homeschool,” secure in the general acceptance of the practice.

Another constant question even now is, “What grade are you in?” For a family that doesn’t follow the convention of grades this requires a little creativity. Our children have learned just to calculate what grade they would be in if they were inmates of the local school and answer with that number. No one ever follows up with more questions once you’ve told them “10th grade” or whatever.

Last summer my then-seventeen-year-old daughter Sarah began to be asked a new question (for us), “When are you graduating?” Perhaps knowing my nonchalant attitude toward traditional customs she began to lobby me to think about planning some kind of “graduation” come late spring this year (when, indeed, she would be graduating had she attended school). She knew that I didn’t care for the normal practice of homeschooler graduations in which the graduates don rented caps and gowns and march the aisle of a local church to the strains of “Pomp and Circumstance” — thus mimicking the very schools they have not used. But she didn’t want to have to answer the newest question with something like, “Well, I’m not actually graduating because my father doesn’t really believe in it, and, yes, you were right to think we homeschoolers are strange and, no, I’m not going on to college, and, well, see my Dad and he’ll explain about our being peculiar people....”

So I committed to allowing her to “graduate” this spring so that she could provide an easy answer to “When are you graduating?” All she had to say was, “In May.” Now she fit the system and didn’t have to be an apologist for some neo-paleo-idea of her father’s. But this meant I had to figure out what we were going to do for this “graduation” to which relatives and friends expected invitations. What follows is our family’s thoughts on this matter of graduation in the context of the whole matter of the passage from childhood to adulthood, followed by a summary of what we ended up doing on that special day in May.

Total Life Preparation

For me, the matter of completing certain academic requirements considered generally as “high school” level is not particularly important. The standards for graduation vary drastically from school to school (and home to home), so it doesn’t mean a whole lot anyway. Beyond that, though, the emphasis on

academic achievement is itself a questionable one. Though it is typical of our Greek-influenced culture to emphasize intellectual (and physical) accomplishments, a more Hebrew (biblical) approach would be to stress character and wisdom. The most important questions are not "What is your grade point average?" or "What is your SAT score?" but rather "Are you developing into a Christ-like man or woman?" or "Can you use the knowledge you have gained in some real-life service to God?" Academics are part of preparing for adulthood, but just a part; so marking a nebulous academic passage may not make the most sense.

It would make more sense to devise some rite of passage from childhood to adulthood that took account of the need for a total preparation for life. John Thompson has in these pages reported on something he calls "Life Graduation" (Patriarch #14, "College at Home: For the Glory of God"). Basically his idea is that the passage from youth to adulthood should be defined as being adequately trained in every area needed to function as a mature man or woman of God, not just academics.

We ought to think in terms of a thorough discipleship process rather than an "education" process. For a child to be well trained and ready for adulthood he must be discipled in each of his key relationships in life: to God, to family, to church, and to the world. This training is accomplished through four essential disciplines: spiritual development, academic studies, life skills training, and creative arts. Let's look at these more closely. First, the four key relationships.

Relationship with God. Our chief aim in raising our children is that they know the living God through faith in Jesus Christ. "Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent" (John 17:3). What does it profit our children if they graduate with honors from a reputable school but don't know the Lord? We must pray for them and teach them and love them in order, by God's grace, to lead them to salvation and to a walk of holiness in obedience to his will. "He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8). That is the first lesson our "home schools" should teach.

Relationship with family. Far more important than teaching algebra (though we needn't choose one or the other) is teaching a young person how to properly function in a family. This means training him to honor father and mother (Eph. 6:1-3), but it also means preparing him to be a husband and a father himself (or her a wife and mother). Our children are not prepared for life until they have the training necessary for them to take a spouse and start a family. They need to understand how to love and respect a spouse, how to set up house and budget money, how to bear children and train them. Our culture spends virtually no time preparing youths for the most important earthly callings they will have. Life preparation for Christian families ought not follow in that neglect.

Relationship with church. In this New Covenant age church is right alongside family as a priority for Christians. I'm not referring, of course, to the institutional pseudo-church that runs families ragged with activities that supposedly "minister" to those families. I have in mind the people of God gathered under the headship of Christ, with biblical leadership, with teaching from the Word, with the fellowship of the Spirit expressed in the ministry of gifts and in the bonds of fervent love, and with a lifestyle of holiness. There are scores of passages that proclaim our responsibilities to fellow believers (love one another, serve one another, teach one another ...). Our children must be trained to take their place within the body of Christ and to join in its mission to disciple the nations and bring Christ to the world.

Relationship with the world. God made man, male and female, to multiply in the earth and take dominion over it to the glory of God (Gen. 1:26-28). This is now accomplished through the spread of the gospel and kingdom of Jesus (Matt. 28:18-20). Our families and our churches are the agencies God is using in this enterprise. Our children should be disciplined in how to use and develop their God-given abilities to take dominion over God's creation and spread Christ's kingdom. It is a large purpose for which Christian parents are preparing their children!

Children are disciplined to serve in these four key relationships through training in the four basic disciplines. Let's look at those.

Spiritual development. Growing in our walk with God doesn't just happen, as many of us have found out the hard way. It takes discipline and practice. Parents ought to train their children to have a daily devotional time with the Lord, to study the Bible, to pray. They should teach them how to apply God's Word to life. They should train them in the development of godly character. Parents who themselves walk with God should take their children on that walk. A Christian youth is not ready for the duties of manhood or womanhood until he or she knows how to abide in Christ day by day.

Academic studies. The 3 Rs and all that comes after is a vital part of discipleship. Our children should excel in all the subject areas that are taught in other schools. They should learn all about God's works in creation and history, which when you think about it covers any academic subject you can name (cf. Ps. 78:4). They should have more, though. They should be able to relate each discipline to God's Word and his purpose in Christ (v. 5). That is a truly Christian education. "In [Christ] are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2:3).

Life skills training. Is a young man prepared for life if he has a diploma in hand but can't fix a light switch or make a simple bookcase? Is a young woman prepared for life if she has her diploma but can't cook vegetable stew or bake bread? Raising children to be adults includes equipping them with the practical skills they need to live day by day and fulfill their anticipated callings as husbands/fathers and wives/mothers. Taking dominion means having a hands-on acquaintance with God's creation and being able to utilize and even improve the tools of culture that other men have developed.

Creative arts. God's creation is not only very useful, it is also very beautiful.

Enjoying that beauty and re-creating things of beauty is a vital part of what it means to be made in the image of God. Our children are only fully trained when they have learned to both appreciate and incorporate beauty in their everyday lives. Young ladies especially should learn to create homes that reflect a “spirit of loveliness,” but the young men should also be taught that orderliness and attractiveness are created by God and should be mirrored in all our work. Children should also be exposed to and led to participate in the fine arts (music, painting, sculpture, etc.), according to their interests and gifts.

Commencement vs. graduation

So our vision of what it takes to pass from being a youth to being an adult is rather all-encompassing and makes the mere passing of an academic hurdle rather inconsequential by comparison. But it was this larger vision that I wanted to incorporate in Sarah’s graduation. I decided to call the event a “Commencement” (to borrow another graduation-related term), but it had a new meaning for us. We were marking the commencement of Sarah upon the journey of godly womanhood, having been adequately prepared to take on that role (the term is thus the equivalent of Life Graduation).

In her case I decided that she was sufficiently disciplined to take this larger step at her now 18 years of age. It may not always be the case that a youth is ready for Commencement at age 18. That is especially so for young men who often need several years of special preparation to be ready to take on the support of a wife and family.

It may be most helpful to separate the idea of graduation from high school from that of Commencement as here defined. For the sake of convention (including inquiring relatives and friends) it may be useful to acknowledge the passing of the cultural milestone of finishing “high school” level work (graduation). But the big emphasis would be placed on that moment of passage when a father and mother declared a son or daughter fully prepared to step onto the stage of life as a godly man or woman in their own right and, in particular, ready to take a spouse and set up a home (Commencement).

There could be several ways to mark the traditional graduation: a group homeschool ceremony with other homeschoolers in the community or the church, an informal open house in which friends are invited to mark the occasion with the graduate, a more formal home-based ceremony, etc. Then, when appropriate, there could be another event to mark the step of Commencement.

I would suggest that we gradually move away from dwelling on “high school” “graduation” at all in favor of concentrating on the truly important step of what we are calling Commencement, the formal entrance onto the path of godly manhood or womanhood. Christian homeschoolers have an opportunity to help shape the culture here. Let’s not just unthinkingly copy what everybody else does. Let’s set a new standard.

Our Commencement Ceremony

I'll share with you what we did just to get you started thinking about how an alternative might work. Sarah sent out invitations on some artistic blank-on-the-inside cards on which I had printed the words of invitation on my laser printer. We announced the event as a 2 p.m. ceremony at our house (on a Saturday), followed by an open house until 5 p.m. We put up a rented party tent in our yard across the drive from our house (by God's grace, we have a wonderful, park-like, four-acre yard) and placed about 90 chairs under it. Pam (my worth-more-than-rubies mate) and Sarah went all out creating a spirit of loveliness in the house and throughout the yards. I contributed to the beauty by placing four speakers outside and wafting the strains of Bach and Vivaldi all over the grounds.

The front of the program I created read: "Service to acknowledge the Commencement of Sarah Joyce Lancaster upon the journey of godly womanhood." Inside was the Order of Service and the words to the hymns we had chosen. Here is the what the ceremony itself consisted of:

Welcome. Pretty obvious.

Scripture Reading. This was Psalm 67 which I chose because it is the reference I had engraved in Pam's wedding band (25 years ago — our anniversary was 3 days after Sarah's Commencement). Sarah is the first of the blessings I had asked for using the words of that Psalm, and she is the first arrow we have prepared (Ps. 127) by which we hope to see fulfilled our prayer: "may your ways be known on earth, your salvation among all nations" (67:2).

Hymn. "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing" (one of Sarah's favorites).

Prayer. Invocation-like.

The Meaning of Commencement. Here I explained what I have written about in this article.

Hymn. "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross." This is another of Sarah's favorites; I introduced it as describing the focus of our preparation of our daughter.

Recognition of God's Grace in Sarah's Life. Here I had Pam come up to help. I would read a couple verses at a time of Proverbs 31:10-31, and after each reading Pam would recount some of the accomplishments the Lord had enabled in Sarah's life, for example: "provides food" (15) — her cooking and baking; "clothed in scarlet" (21) — her sewing; "wisdom, faithful instruction" (26) — her academic achievements; "fears the Lord" (30) — her years of personal devotions, reading through Scripture, Bible memory, etc.

Special Titus 2 Award. Here Sarah and I surprised Pam by giving her a gift as an expression of appreciation for being a Titus 2 Mom who had taught this younger woman and as a reminder of the occasion. It was a “blessing necklace” with little boy and girl charms (with appropriate birthstones) for each of the six children.

Declaration and Presentation. I read a diploma-like page and handed the ribbon-tied copy to Sarah. It read:

Declaration and Commendation: Be it known that Sarah Joyce Lancaster, having completed a program composed of academic studies, life skills training, and creativity, and having been thoroughly disciplined in her relationship with God, family, church, and world, is hereby prepared to commence upon the journey of godly womanhood. She is commended to the Body of Christ as a woman “of noble character ... who fears the Lord.” (Prov. 31) Affirmed by the undersigned, her parents, this 31st day of May, the year of our Lord 1997.

Pam and I had signed her copy.

Father’s Prayer and Blessing. I thanked God for his work in Sarah and prayed about her future as a godly woman. Then I laid my hands on her and pronounced a blessing based on Num. 6:24-26 and Heb. 13:20,21.

Encouragement from the Church. Several men offered some brief words of encouragement to Sarah from the Scripture and their experience with the Lord. I had let the men know in advance of this opportunity.

Hymn. “Now Thank We All Our God.” Fitting words with which to conclude.

Dismissal. After this we served lots of homemade finger foods and a wonderful sweet tea punch (the recipe came from some friends in Texas). People sat inside or out, or strolled around the grounds enjoying the fellowship and music. All in all, a totally memorable day.

Just to give you another quick example: Our Texas friends recently faced the “graduation” milestone with one of their boys. They decided to have “A Blessing” instead of the cap and gown ceremony. They invited 70 friends and family to an evening graduation open house. After food and visiting they called the people together for a little ceremony in which the Dad introduced the Mom as the chief teacher; she gave her personal reflections on her son. The son then systematically expressed his thanks to all who had helped shaped his life, many of whom were present. Then the father explained the biblical concept of blessing (many present were not familiar with this), referring to Genesis 27, 48, and 49, and read a carefully prepared Blessing for the son, which included references to the son’s character and accomplishments, after which he prayed for him. It was a very warm, personal time which was a powerful testimony to those present about the loving family

bonds that reached the heart of this son.

Conclusion

As we draw toward a close, let me emphasize my main concerns in writing this article.

First, *aim to prepare children fully for life*. That preparation takes a lot more than teaching school subjects. It involves assuring that they are mature, completely prepared to leave our home and set up their own and to otherwise take on an adult role in church and society.

Second, *don't just copy the patterns dictated by the popular culture*. It makes sense for schools to have graduations; it marks the termination of that academic program which bound a particular group of people together in a common pursuit. But home educators have chosen another paradigm entirely. We don't need to do "school" and we don't need "graduations". It's OK to do both, but you are free to do neither. Why copy the ceremonies of mass, institutional schooling?

Third, *be creative with alternative rites of passage*. We have the opportunity for a wholly different kind of training, discipleship rooted in relationship and designed to reach the heart. We also have the chance to create new rites of passage. Let's be inventive and come up with some that reflect who we are as unique families. Yours won't look just like mine, nor should it. Express your family in a way that fits you.
