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## Reverence, Mystery, and Christian Education

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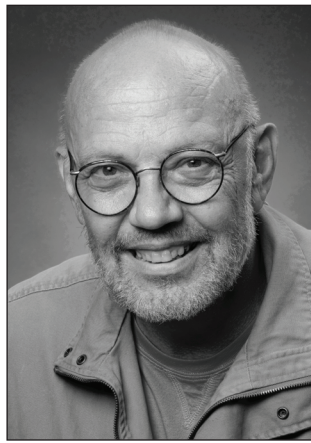
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**Editor's Note:** This speech was presented at the Christian Education Association annual convention in South Bend, Indiana, in 2007.

# Reverence, Mystery, and Christian Education

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by James Calvin Schaap

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Dr. James Calvin Schaap is Professor of English at Dordt College and the author of 25 books of various genres. His stories and articles have been honored by the Associated Church Press, the Evangelical Press Association, and the Iowa Arts Council. He authored Dordt's Jubilee play, *Vision at Work and Play*, a history of the Christian Reformed Church; *Our Family Album*; as well as devotionals and the World War II biography of Diet Eman, *Things We Couldn't Say*. His novel *Touches the Sky* was given an Award of Merit by *Christianity Today* in 2004, as was his *Startling Joy*, a collection of Christmas stories, in 2005. His most recent book is *Sixty at Sixty: A Boomer Looks at the Psalms*, as well as an essay on creative non-fiction in the newly released *A Syllable of Water*, and a two-part essay on Indian boarding schools in *Books and Culture*. He has been teaching literature and writing at Dordt College for thirty-one years.

Twenty years ago, when she was ten, my daughter defined Christian education in a way that left her parents chuckling, sort of. The State of Iowa's largesse toward parental and parochial education includes free bus rides, so from our back door to the sidewalk running up to the Christian school she attended, she and her friends were in the company of twenty or more public schoolers, most of whom attended churches confessing the same catechism as we did and do. What was obvious to my daughter, however, even at ten, was that those kids were different.

"Only public school kids have cable TV," she said, one night, over supper, very matter-of-factly, as if the assertion had been passed by a Christian school legislature.

Today, her parents have cable, as she does; and while there may have been some lag-time, within a year or two the line she drew in the sand was washed out by the appeal of *Nickelodeon*, *The History Channel*, and a host of other options. But, for a time back then at least, my daughter and her friends could proudly define the character of Christian education—after all, the little heathens on the bus all had cable. Not so the righteous.

Moralism is really entry-level Christianity, but a significant stop on every believer's pilgrimage. I know it in myself: when I was my daughter's age, my friends and I were assaulted by a bunch of public school kids who snowballed us nearly to death, then wrestled us down and gave us face-

washings. They could just as well have left us on the street buck naked. I thought them pagans, myself a Stephen. Not so many years later, they were my best friends.

It's easy—and it's even right at times—to fill in the lines between the city of God and the city of man with our own definitions.

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*Moralism is really entry-level Christianity but a significant stop on every believer's pilgrimage.*

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Just last summer, I heard a Lakota lay pastor narrate the story of his escape from alcoholism. To him, being unburdened from booze meant being freed from sin. At a flea market in Brazil several years ago, I picked up a wood-carving, perfectly elegant, of Madonna and child. My hosts, evangelical Christians, very devout, made it very clear that I shouldn't buy the enemy's graven image. I put it down, then bought another—much costlier—when I was out of their company at the airport.

I spent countless hours, not long ago, interviewing Southeast Asian refugees who'd become Christians. They brought me into worlds I never would have known without hearing their stories. But their perception of the Christianity they'd embraced—often far more passionately than I do—began with a definition of what they weren't: no longer smokers and drinkers, no longer promiscuous at parties, no longer spending time daily at the casino. They're Christians now: they worship God, and they don't do dirty things.

Is there really anything more “unReformed,” if I may use that word, than the cute little oldie but goldie, “Be careful little eyes what you see?” I think it's possible to argue, oddly enough, that the Christian Reformed Church, the denomination of which I am a part, was probably never quite as “modern” as it was in the famous Synodical decision of 1928, when it tried to stamp its individual members with a behavioral bar code for quick and easy check-out,

by warning its members against the evils of playing cards, social dancing, and the movies. For several generations, that kind of moralism came to define its denominational members, even when they broke the roles. Moralizing, such as my daughter's well-meant directive about cable TV, effectively demystifies faith, making it a children's game of chutes and ladders.

The truth is, of course, all of us eventually graduate from Sunday school, and it's well that we should—not because Sunday school's moral directives are necessarily wrong but because the risk of abuse is so great: *only the heathens have cable.*

Let's investigate roots. Several generations ago, people in my faith tradition used to talk about “the antithesis” as if it were—as it probably is—the kissing cousin of the biblical precept of “the straight-and-narrow.”

No one in the Reformed tradition has trumpeted ye olde concept of “the antithesis” as heartily as the CRC-born-and-reared but Westminster Seminary-associated Cornelius Van Til, who spent much of his theologian's life asserting the diametrical opposition between belief and unbelief and therefore between belief and any compromise of revealed truth.

Honestly, I have no quarrel with the doctrine. It's impossible to argue—especially from the great themes of Scripture—that the reality of the antithesis is erroneous—wrong.

But in my own lifetime, I can remember dozens of moments when “the antithesis” morphed into snap judgments and self-righteous blackballing, the measure of what my daughter applied to the not-so-well-integrated school bus she rode in—categorization that became “us and them.”

And, it's important to own up to the facts. Today, for better or worse, we live in a different age. In an age that celebrates, even worships diversity, “us-and-them” thinking is in very bad taste, *verboden*. It's blessedly easy for me to take on cheap moralism, to blast away at “us-and-them,” even an honored old theological concept like “the antithesis,” because nothing is more righteous today than inclusivity, as bringing people in, bringing us all together and finding a place for everyone. “We worship at the altar of the bitch goddess of tolerance,” Charles Colson says, shockingly, in a recent *Christianity*

*Today.* I certainly wouldn't have said that, but it's clear that nothing is as despised as keeping people out.

I really believe I could make a good argument that the parentally-run Christian school movement needs a good shot of "us-and-them" thinking, but I don't have to. That kind of strategy is very much alive and kicking, perennially, in the question of proper attire for school—should Christian schools adopt school uniforms? In an age when cleavage is on display on the floor of Congress, when t-shirts say just about anything, when the only loose tops in the world are burkas, what should *Christian* children wear to *Christian* school? The antithesis is alive and kicking, even if and when—as they are today—the lines in so many discussions are immensely blurred.

You may think I'm running in circles here, but the topic I am addressing—what is the difference between teaching in a Christian school and teaching in a public school?—aside from the knee-jerk answers is not particularly easy to think through because I'm quite sure of this: what makes my teaching "Christian"—at least what I'd like to *think* makes it thus, God alone being both witness and judge—is far more than *what I don't say*, what my students *don't* read, what ideas are *verboten*, negatives absolutely *not* entertained in my classroom.

Definition by negation is something we all do—"I'm a Christian school kid because I don't have cable television," "a believer because I'm not a drunk or adulterer or drug user." I'm a Christian because my little ears *don't* listen to things they shouldn't and my eyes don't look at naughty things.

There is legitimacy to those definitions. I swear there is. But being a Christian teacher, a Christian teacher in language arts, in literature and writing—for me at least, at the college level, but even, as I once was, at the high school level—is about far more than can be defined by negation, by *what we're not*. Nobody really believes that uniforms are going to make what happens under the roof of a school for Christian instruction any more "Christian." It may well make our students look better; they may even perform better, and, goodness knows, they'll look much better to an outside world to whom we'd love to market our enterprise. But is a plaid

skirt going to teach kids to see all of his life as belonging to Him? I doubt it.

All of this is to say that I'm sure of at least this so far: my teaching is *not* "Christian" simply because of what I *don't* teach. Community standards may well apply here; there are many, many places in Christian school circles today where Hillary Clinton is as much a part of the Evil Empire as Iran. But I hope no one would want to assert that a Christian school is a Republican field base. Definition by negation is as handy as it is useful. But it can't justify Christian education. We are more than what we aren't.

Let's go another direction. Let me introduce you to two teachers I used to teach with. One of them—I'll call Drew—taught history with a passion, constantly looking for creative ways to make kids interested in stories from the past that thrilled him. And then there was Janice, who taught a course titled Family and Marriage. Students loved her. She gave herself completely to the task.

It was the mid-seventies, and drug use was still high throughout my generation, despite the fact that Sixties types like me were already into the work force. Drew used to smoke-up before school in the morning, get high on his way. It was more habitual with him than bothersome, I believe—and, of course, it was illegal. But the buzz would be gone soon enough, I'm sure, and he'd do his thing in the classroom. He was a terrific teacher, worked hard at his profession.

Janice had been married twice and was presently living with a guy, all of which she was quite proud of. Her perspective on issues in family and marriage was undoubtedly different from that of professionals in the Christian schools down the block—and it was different from my own, her colleague. But she was a very fine teacher, as was Drew.

Here's an application for that old song—"Be careful little eyes what you see." As a child of a distinct religious tradition headstrong about its righteousness, once upon a time I found it very difficult to "see" that people who did bad things or didn't see things as I did could be good teachers. But then, as we all know, common grace runs headstrong into the antithesis because people who don't measure their behavior by our definitions of

satisfactory ways can be very, very fine teachers. Maybe my own experiences in public education were less than beneficial to me. Maybe I'd have been better off through life had I not noted that good teachers came in a variety of "professions." I don't know.

But I do know this: "Christian" teaching is not just *good teaching*. Nope. I've known a ton of good teachers in my time, and lots of them weren't believers. I have no idea if they were atheists, but I know they had very little concept of what I thought of as "the straight and narrow," at least in the ways that I've defined it throughout my life.

I think I could play negation all day, continue to say what Christian education isn't, but that would be a dodge. The question I'm dancing around is, "What does it mean to be a Christian teacher in language arts—in literature and writing?" "How is my teaching distinctive?"

I know this: my own teaching style did not—I repeat *did not*—change all that much when I left public education. Those truths I used to couch in personal idiosyncrasy in the public school—by law—as in, "Now, if you want to know what I believe," I might well say in the same way today, teaching in a Christian college. You may disagree, but, at least at my level, teaching *isn't* preaching—or at least it shouldn't be. Let me rephrase that in deference to the preachers: teaching is not inculcation. Blasting at the surface yields very little, at least not at the level I teach—not only that, I wouldn't *want it* to work. God wants every part of us, including our wills.

I'm still working on some kind of definition—as I've said, this is not an easy question, despite my own long and blessed tradition of Christian parental education.

Let me give you an example that thrills me from a student's paper, a response to "The Father's Story," by Andre Dubus, a fiction writer whose work just about always carries his deep Roman Catholic faith within it. Simply, it's the story of a man named Luke Ripley, who has known his own trials and tribulations but who still talks to God, despite his questions and lack of assurance. By my estimation, that story is unforgettable, and most of my college students would say the same thing—"that story was the highlight of the reading."

On an assignment last year, one student wrote that several times during the reading of that story, he was so moved that he was struck to his knees to pray:

There is a point in "A Father's Story" when Luke Ripley goes through his morning routine and talks to God. As I sat and read this early morning act of devotion, I felt as though the golden sunlight of my early evening shone right through my window and through this story. The Lord's

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*My purpose is to address the presence, significance, and motivations of a category of continuing, often long-term players in the American political process.*

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Prayer, writes Dubus, "whether recited or said with concentration, is always an act of faith." This was the first moment in the story when I put the story down and prayed. As the focus drew closer and closer on Luke's concluding challenge to God, my prayer grew stronger and more clear. Something in "A Father's Story" found the part of me that wants to someday be a dad, and the depth of its insight sparked with life that future father part inside of me.

When I first read that line, I wondered whether, like the priest Levi, the baby Jesus in his arms, I could simply tell my fellow teachers that I had now seen enough to quit the profession. In a way, I didn't want to read that student's confession in the essay since the assignment was not to tell the prof some personal narrative of his own faith pilgrimage; what he said in the paper didn't belong in the essay—and I told him as much. On the other hand, reading that was just about the best gift I received as a teacher that semester.

The reason I think of that paper now, however, is the immense satisfaction—as a lover of literature—I had in knowing that a short story

(could have been a poem or a novel or a play) actually affected this student so deeply that it pushed him, awe-filled, to his knees. The kid was 19, not 50+, like Luke Ripley; but something in that story brought him closer to God. All I did was assign the story. I didn't ballyhoo it, didn't market or cheerlead. I simply assigned it, and the beauty of the medium morphed into worship.

Perhaps I've stumbled on something here: maybe what we Christian teachers want out of our students is *worship*, not in a church, not in some prayer closet somewhere, not in the security of their own bedrooms—although I'd be happy for that too. Maybe what we want from them is *worship*, which is to say, I think, awe—reverence, an attitude of mind that may well be in short supply with the Y-Generation, as prone as they are, by their affluence, and ours, to sheer narcissism. My student got pushed to his knees by the strength of that story, and his aging prof, me, in the confines of my office, amid a blizzard of papers, just about lost it when I read that it happened.

I'm going to push this for a minute here by reading you a little essay of mine which appeared in a number of places several years ago, an essay about an outing that I regularly take with my advanced writing students to a place on the prairie where no one is around.

### **“That Unforgettable Morning, on the Prairie”**

Out here in Iowa where I live, on the eastern emerald cusp of the Great Plains, on some balmy early fall days it's not hard to believe that we are not where we are. Warm southern breezes sweep all the way up from the Gulf, the sun smiles with a gentleness not seen since June, and the spacious sky reigns over everything in azure glory.

On exactly that kind of fall morning, I like to bring my writing classes to what I call a ghost town, Highland, Iowa, a place whose remnants still exist, eight miles west and two south of town, as they say out here on the square-cut prairie, a village that was, but is no more. Likely as not Highland fell victim to a century-old phenomenon in the farm belt, the simple fact that far more people lived out here when the land was cut into 160-acre chunks than do now, when the portions are ten times bigger.

What's left of Highland is a stand of pines

circled up around no more than twenty gravestones, and an old carved sign with hand-drawn figures detailing what was once a post-office address for some people—a Main Street composed of a couple of churches and their horse barns, a blacksmith shop, and little else. The town of Highland, Iowa, once sat at the confluence of a pair of non-descript gravel roads that still float out in four distinct directions like dusky ribbons over the undulating prairie.

I like to bring my students to Highland because what's not there never fails to silence them. Maybe it's the skeletal cemetery; maybe it's the south wind's low moan through that stand of pines, a sound you don't hear often on the treeless Plains; maybe it's some variant of culture shock—they stumble sleepily out of their cubicle dorm rooms and wake up suddenly in sprawling prairie spaciousness.

I'm lying. I know why they fall into psychic shock. It's the sheer immensity of the open land that unfurls before them, the horizon only seemingly there where earth seams effortlessly into sky; it's the vastness of rolling land William Cullen Bryant once claimed looked like an ocean stopped in time. Suddenly, they open their eyes and it seems as if there's nothing here, and that's what stuns them into silence.

This year, on a morning none of them will ever forget, when we stood and sat in the ditches along those gravel roads, no cars went by. We were absolutely alone—20 of us, alone and vulnerable on a swell of prairie once called the village of Highland, surrounded by nothing but startling openness.

That's where I was—and that's where they were—on September 11, 2001. My class and I left for Highland at just about the moment Atta and his friends were steering the first 767 into the first World Trade Center tower, so we knew nothing about what had happened until it was over. While the rest of the world stood and watched in horror, my students and I looked over a landscape so immense only God could live there—and were silent before him.

No one can stay on a retreat forever, of course, so when we returned to the college we heard the news. Who didn't? All over campus, TV's blared.

But I like to think that maybe my students were

best prepared for the horror of that morning, not by our having been warned but by our having been awed.

Every year it's a joy to sit out there and try to describe the character of the seemingly eternal prairie, but this year our being there on September 11, I'm convinced, was a blessing.

I wonder if reverence isn't the key to what we want to do in Christian education in general: create, nurture, and model reverence—reverence, in my case, for writing, for literature, for story, for speech, for clarity of expression, for all things bright and beautiful—and *even* for things that are not. Things like cynicism, from which much of the world's great literature derives. Things like investigative journalism, without which our freedom could be much more easily imperiled. Things like doubt, as deeply a part of the music of the Psalms as praise. Things like the blues, the utterance of an emptied soul and heart.

I wonder if *reverence* isn't our goal, somehow—I mean along with a ton of things the state requires and our students simply need to get along in this world. Much of the work of an English teacher—by far, most of it—is doing a job that must get

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done: teaching vocabulary, sentence structure, thesis-writing, the characteristics of an Elizabethan sonnet, writing a clear business letter. But I'm wondering if reverence might not be some kind of key to things, the beginning of difference, at least in my profession.

It's sometimes painful for me to remember that the most crucial objective of Freshman English at Dordt College is to help the students write clearly—how mundane! But I wonder if I don't do

that job more proficiently when I lead my students toward writing that stuns them like that Dubus short story, that shocks them with its clarity and precision and beauty. Or, therapeutically, if I show them that writing is a way of knowing, as it's always been to me—and as it was to Flannery O'Connor. "I don't know what it is I think until I write it," she once said. There's a magic to writing that some of us know and feel; that's why many of us teach language arts.

And in a way it's a joy to have entered the era of Facebook and blogs because today—unlike any other time in human history—everyone has a room of their own, a place to write, an opportunity to present themselves to the world via words and ideas. Today, it seems, more than ever, our students can learn the sheer joy of expression, not simply as a classroom exercise, but with a real or even a virtual audience, a readership.

But how do we teach awe? How can we better nurture reverence?

Rubber-meets-the-road kind of question, isn't it?

Tell you what. Let's import one of the ground rules of great writing here: show don't tell. What convinces in good writing is illustration, is example, is explanation, not platitude. I'm quite sure—and I'm closing in on 40 years of teaching—that if *we* aren't reverent, if *we* aren't thrilled by what we like like Andre Dubus, if *we* aren't really taken with the beauty and grace of good writing, no matter what the genre, our students won't be either. What I've discovered on a decade of annual jaunts out to the open prairie is that if I'm not silenced by the expanse of God's wonderful creation, my students won't be either.

It seems to me that in addition to all of the matters which must be accomplished in teaching literature and writing—"what on earth is a dangling participle?" "who was this eccentric Poe anyway?"—that characteristic which most defines us as Christian educators, no matter what the field of study, is reverence as a primary behavioral objective of what we do from day to day in the classroom. And that is a character attribute we all have to show, not tell.

Here are this morning's literary headlines, at least in England: "Sales of a book titled *Skinny*

*Bitch* soared by 674 per cent on Amazon after Victoria Beckham was spotted with a copy in Los Angeles, a book the news article calls “a vegan diet with a bit of attitude,” supposedly a diet plan for skinny girls “who want to stop eating crap and start looking fabulous.”

I don’t want to be disingenuous here. The fact is, I’d love to have any book of mine move up 674 per cent in sales in one day. I’d love it if Paris Hilton was spotted at a party toting a copy of *Romey’s Place*. Wouldn’t that be grand? Sure.

But I’m thinking, once again, of Cornelius Van Til, and the antithesis, the wide gulf which still separates city of God from the city of Man, the Celestial City from Vanity Fair.

The more I think about my peculiar task as a Christian teacher of literature and writing—and much of it remains mystery to me—the more I’m confident that what we do in Christian education is counter-cultural because nothing may be more radical, more shocking in education today, than teaching our students to be humble, which is an attitude of mind prerequisite to awe; than teaching selflessness, the polar opposite of narcissism; than teaching servanthood, which is to say denial, in the pattern of Christ himself.

That task, as all of you know, is made immensely more difficult by our own affluence. How can we nurture awe in our students when they and their families spend spring break in Bermuda or Christmas in Vail?

One quick story: Many here remember Rev. Tony Van Zanten, who ministered faithfully at Roseland, suburban Chicago, before he was called home. Tony took a number of his parishioners from Roseland to a performance of *Our Family Album* several years ago, a drama telling the story of the Christian Reformed Church. He said he wanted to know what *they* thought; he wanted to hear their reviews. And he was surprised, he said, when on the trip back from Chicago’s west side, they were silent. What had surprised them was the fact that the people celebrated in that show were, at one time, desperately poor. They had no idea. They’d always thought of the people from my tradition, the white people, as being immensely rich.

I wish I could pass a magic wand, create a

couple of tools that would inspire your students to awe and worship, but I can’t. What I can do is refresh your own deeply felt attitudes with this kind of formulation: that, as Christ himself said, it is easier for a rich man to pass through an eye of a needle than it is to enter the kingdom of God, which means, very practically, in terms of what I’m telling you today, that our task—if I’m right in asserting that awe may be the most blessed behavioral objective of all in Christian education—that our task is truly and deeply counter-cultural, inasmuch as it humbles us and reveres just about everything that isn’t us.

In no way does that statement make our task any easier, but at least we can understand it for what it is and really always has been. Perhaps the worst fate for Christian schools is that eventually they morph into elitist sanctuaries for the privileged. Those of you who’ve been around for awhile know very well how easily that can happen, and how it already has—ever since the seventeenth century, in fact.

I’m no prophet of doom, so let me also bring up another characteristic of our culture today that is worth considering. Some call our age “post-materialist” because as a culture we’ve changed into idealists, in a way. Example? Recently, I heard a marketing executive talk about the history of media advertising, which began with a direct pitch that attempted to do nothing more than sell a product on the basis of its attributes (think early TV, if you can—soap that cleans your hands). Then, he said, advertising moved into a different era—the marketing of a lifestyle: beer commercials that proclaim “you only go around once.” But today, he said, we’ve entered an age that’s anti-materialist because the goods corporations have to promise an almost spiritual vision—in many cases, that they not leave an dirty footprint. The American public, he said, is becoming more concerned about a soap being biogradable than whether it gets their hands clean or leaves a glow that seduces the lover they desire.

One more example. Of all the states of the union, Iowa is most altered, topographically, from what it was at the beginning, say, of the nineteenth century: the tall-grass prairie is all but wiped out by row crops. Of Iowa’s 99 counties, Sioux County, where I live, is, I’m told, the *most* altered. When I



took some visitors around a few years ago, I told them I lamented the fact that none of that tall-grass prairie was around anymore, that nearly every square inch was under cultivation. But go back fifty years with me, for a minute: if I'd been giving a tour in 1957, say, I would likely have trumpeted the joy of how the good Christian farmers of Sioux County, Iowa, had taken this verdant land and made it produce food for the world. My values today are shaped by the anti-materialism of the age, without a doubt. I'd much prefer a beautiful chunk of native prairie somewhere in the neighborhood.

It's important for us to see that our affluence has nurtured our anti-materialism. If I were hungry, if my grandchildren were starving, I wouldn't think much about the mystic beauty of an ancient ocean of grass.

And I say this because I believe it's terrifyingly easy sometimes for believers to fall into woe and not awe. Dickens may well have written better than he knew, because these times may well be the best of times *and* the worst of times, and it's not at all "normative" for us to assume, simply, either that there was a golden age sometime in the misty past, or that we're somehow sliding off toward the apocalypse. Nobody knows the time or day, even though good, strong believers have believed they did for dozens of centuries.

If awe—deep regard for the Lord God of Heaven and Earth and the redemptive work of his son, Jesus—if reverence and worship for that Lord of all is the vital difference between Christian and public education, then we need to see that that God doesn't leave us stranded; currents in our age may offer more help than we might immediately assess.

One aspect of our era worth noting is the significant change in the levels of spirituality that tangibly exist in our schools, a level of spirituality that makes it easier than it used to be—not harder—for an old man like me to visit your schools and lead chapels. Believe me, it's easier today than it was when late-'60s cynicism was observable in abject disregard. I don't have to tell you that doing Christian high chapels should have earned me combat pay twenty years ago. For the most part it's not that way today.

An observable rise in spirituality—and I'm not saying that's always a blessing—might well make

it easier for us to call our students to awe and humility, to worship.

But let's not fool ourselves. Can anything be more politically incorrect in America today than saying and actually believing that we are not our own, but belong, body and soul, to our faithful savior, Jesus Christ? Honestly—and I'm saying this as a sinner, saved by grace—that's a task that

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*Only by his grace—our  
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is beyond us, but ours nonetheless. Only by his grace—our thankfulness—can we hope to be truly Christian—which is to say humble, reverent servants.

What comes to mind as I finish up is that excoriating monologue that brings the book of Job to a thundering close, where God says,

Where were you when I created the earth?

Tell me, since you know so much!

Who decided on its size? Certainly you'll know that!

Who came up with the blueprints?

How was its foundation poured?

and who set the cornerstone

While the morning stars sang in chorus

and all the angels shouted praise?

Who took charge of the ocean

when it gushed forth like a baby from the womb?

That was me!

I hear those roaring rhetorical questions and that blistering response because nothing is at once more humbling and more reassuring than giving our joys and sorrows, than giving away our selves, into the safekeeping of that God.