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Pray Tell

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Pray Tell

(1984 Commencement Address)

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Dr. James Skillen became a member of the Dordt faculty in 1978, having taught previously at Messiah College and Gordon College. Dr. Skillen received his Ph.D. in political science from Duke University. Since 1982 he has been full-time Executive Director of the Association for Public Justice; his office is now in Washington, D.C. This article is based on his 1984 Dordt College Commencement address.

Pray tell, Graduates, what now do you think of 1984? You have been branded, you know, whether you like it or not. You are graduating in George Orwell's year. Oh, I know, you can show that Orwell's expectations have not all come to pass. But can you deny the awful threats that surround us, the totalitarian politics that exist in so many parts of the world, helped along by sophisticated technologies that keep expanding by leaps and bounds?

How will you look into the future after this day, Alumni, after you have graduated in 1984?

Do you know when I graduated from college? This is no joke. On June 6, 1966. What,

pray tell, does 6/6/66 suggest to you? It comes pretty close to the mark of the Beast, doesn't it? (Rev. 13:18). Was I branded or not? What should I do with that mark? What will you do with yours? Must you and I cower forever beneath 6/6/66 and 1984?

No, indeed! We need not accept the fate of those numbers. Who, after all, fixes the days and years? What does 1966 or 1984 mark, anyway? Those are not the years of the Beast but the years of our Lord, 1966 and 1984!

You see, even Orwell and the Beast are finally pinned down by God's days and years. The death and resurrection of Christ have even determined our calendar, and every year of our Lord is a sign that God's

time triumphs over all.

But why, pray tell, do I keep asking you these questions? And why the archaic "pray tell," when I could simply ask "What's up?" or "Whadaya think?"

I'm using this expression today because at this climactic moment in your lives, I want to try to burn into your memory the lesson of three A's, just as the year 1984 will be burned into your graduation diploma. What, pray tell, are the three A's? I'm assuming that by now you have mastered your ABC's. School's out now! You're free and on your own. No more ABC's. But as you leave Dordt College, take this lesson of the three A's with you, the lesson of

Abraham,
the Ascension,
Augustine.

Abraham's vision of faith,
The Ascension of Jesus Christ, and
Augustine's prayer for release.

Each of these A's is connected with the most important pleas ever recorded in history—pleas for God's unveiling of the future. Each represents an urgent "pray tell" cast up to God.

Abraham

You remember Abraham, marked by Ur of the Chaldeans and by Haran, just as you are now marked by 1984, the Abraham whom Jahweh called away from the gods and blessed with the promise of being his God, the Abraham to whom the only true God promised billions of offspring and millions of acres of land.

God picked up Abram, remarked him by circumcision, gave him a new name, and drove him into the future with a promise. Everything about God's dealings with Abraham required a vision of the future—a vision much larger and longer than Orwell's gaze in 1948, thirty-six years ahead to 1984. Decades and decades of looking, and work-

ing, and waiting—these were God's gift to Abraham.

In fact, God drove Abraham to such absurd lengths that you and I could not have born up under the stress. For nearly a hundred years Abraham had little land and no offspring, and God drove him on with tantalizing promises. He forced Abraham to cry out from the depths of his soul:

O God, pray tell, how shall I know
that I will possess this land?

(Gen. 15:8)

O God, pray tell, how will a child be
born to a man 100 years old?

(Gen. 17:17)

And do you know what Abraham finally experienced? *God provided!* (Gen. 22:14).

The year of 1984 will soon be past, Graduates, but until the final day of the Lord, you will need the faith of Abraham. Do you know what that means?

It will require everything of you. Abraham's faith demands that every idol be smashed, that all other gods be forsaken. It means that your entire life will have to become one long "pray tell" before the face of God. Will you trust God and walk in Abraham's steps?

Allow God to drive you until you are casting up your prayers without ceasing: "O God, pray tell, how will you *provide* for me in all your great promises?"

God will provide! God drove Abraham and he will drive you by his promises until you can look ahead, as Abraham did, way past 1984, to that City with foundations whose maker and builder is God! (Heb. 11:10)

The Ascension

And what about the Ascension, Graduates of 1984?

Do you remember? Jesus was with his disciples. They had already begun to get used to his resurrection power and glory.

They had witnessed the greatest unveiling of God's glory in history. And as Jesus was about to ascend to his Father, the disciples forced their most urgent question on him.

O Lord, pray tell, is it now that you will restore the kingdom to Israel?

(Acts 1:6)

Can you feel with me the great joy and sadness of that question? Can you see how close to the truth and yet how far away from the truth the disciples were? Can you see how close they came to taking the Lord's

to guide them and refine them and squeeze them until they, too, could learn to pray without ceasing (I Thess. 5:17).

Jesus drove his disciples into the world to bear testimony to what they had seen and heard. They did not yet comprehend it. Who could comprehend it? Who *can* comprehend it? Jesus did not try to explain. One day they would see the kingdom and understand it. But now it was time to work. Gradually as the Spirit drove them to speak forth their testimony they would begin to understand that the kingdom had come, was coming, is coming to fill the whole earth. Jesus could

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name in vain? The Lord of all lords was in their midst. The kingdom was already dawning. The City of God's design was already being built from the building stones of their lives (I Pet. 2:5). And, yet, the disciples had not yet gotten beyond old Israel.

Dordt Alumni, you will find that so often you are light years behind God's revelation of himself. Your urgent "pray tells" will sometimes be such "old hats," such vain things to God that you will be forced again and again to recognize God's immense patience and love for you. That is what Jesus did with those poor, feeble, shortsighted loved ones of his—his disciples. He did not weep at their lack of insight. He did not give up. But rather, he drove them out into the world as God had driven Abraham into the promised land. He drove them forth, not trusting that they would find their own way, but promising that he would send his Spirit

not be confined to Israel anymore than Abraham's seed could finally be satisfied in old Canaan land.

The disciples, and those who heard their testimony, would also learn to look for the coming kingdom—not by thinking about themselves and the recovery of an old lost kingdom, but by giving themselves to others and seeing that the kingdom of God encompasses all the nations that God calls his own in Christ.

Jesus, who had been called out of hell into resurrection glory by his Father, would pray forever for his loved ones (John 17). He who had learned to weep his own "pray tells" to his Father, would teach his disciples how to pray, how to live, how to pray by living and live by praying.

Alumni of 1984, hold the lesson of the Ascension close to your hearts forever, won't you? Fix your eyes on the ascended

one, and go to the Father every day saying, "Father, please guide us into your will on earth as it is done in heaven" (Matt. 6:8-13).

Augustine

Dordt Graduates, you are children of Abraham and joint heirs in the promises of the Ascension. And by the fact of these two A's you must also learn the lesson of Augustine.

God called Augustine out of Manichaeism and scepticism and neoplatonism much as he called Abram out of Ur and Haran, much as he called the disciples out of old Israel. God heard the fervent prayers of Augustine's mother, just as he hears the prayers of your mothers and fathers. It took years, but God finally brought Augustine to honor his mother just as she had loved and honored her son for Christ's sake.

Augustine, like most of you, was by no means an evil man. He was not the worst of sinners, as we would judge sinners. But by the grace of God he came to acknowledge that he was a murderer in his heart. He confessed his adultery, his thievery, his covetousness, and his lies.

You, too, Alumni will be caught on every side by the temptations of pride and lust, of greed and hatred, of doubt and self-centeredness. On some days, you will want to hold onto this world's pleasures with unholy lusts, and on other days you will treat this world with the disdain of ungodly hatred. You, too, are sinners.

So, learn a lesson from Augustine, the child of all these passions, a gentile like you and me, caught in the world of a crumbling Roman empire at a time when there was little on earth to look forward to. In his time, as in ours, the world was teetering under the sins of so many human generations. In his day Rome's future was in doubt. In our day the future of the entire West, the East, the North and South, is in doubt.

God drove Augustine, and drove him, and drove him, until he cried out:

O Lord, pray tell, will you be angry forever? How long, O Lord, how long? Pray tell, is there not in this hour an end to my uncleanness?

(*Confessions*, Bk. 8)

And, do you know, God provided for Augustine as he provided land and offspring and a sacrifice for Abraham; as he provided the Holy Spirit for his myopic disciples. God sent a voice to Augustine in his garden, telling him to read these words of redemption and release from the Apostle Paul, from that son of Abraham who had seen the risen Lord years after the Ascension:

. . . not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ. . . (Rom. 13:13) [*Confessions*, Bk. 8]

"Trust me, Augustine," the Lord answered. "The chaos of collapsing Rome in which you live is not the final word; that is not the end of the matter. Don't go home and get drunk tonight; don't give in to the demands for instant gratification of every desire as if there were no other meaning in life. Ishmael was not the end for Abraham, nor was old Israel the end of the road for the disciples. Trust me, Augustine, and you will gain balance for your emotional and physical life—a balance that can begin to come right now, in this world. This is *my* world, you know.

"Put on the ascended Lord, Augustine, and you will begin to see what Abraham and the gazing disciples began to see—the City of God, coming down out of heaven adorned as a bride for her bridegroom (Rev. 21:2). What you see around you is not the end of the matter. Kingdoms come and go according to my good pleasure. I raise up nations and throw them down (Isa. 40). Don't be surprised. The earth is simply my footstool (Isa. 66:1). But, Augustine, it is *my* footstool. It matters very much to me because it is my creation and I love it with all

my heart.

"Everything that lies before you, every created thing, is mine and I will refine and test and mold it until it is fit for my kingdom. Your sins are forgiven, my son. Go forth on the wings of the Apostle's testimony and redeem the earth for me—all

pleading continuously for the fulfillment of his promises, until you see the City of God ever clearer on the horizon. Give the Lord your art and your teaching, your engineering and your farming, your family and your business, your politics and your worship. Labor long and hard for six days every week

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its culture and science and family life and politics and education. Forgive your enemies and redeem the earth. It is mine, and you are mine, and I am yours in Christ. Pick up everything in Rome and beyond; pick it all up in the Spirit of Christ and carry it on into the Holy City."

Alumni, pray tell, do you see what God has given you in 1984? The year that marks you now can be a symbol for all your days, to remind you to pray, to pray without ceasing. No human prediction, no mark of the Beast need be your lot in life. God is ready to answer your prayers as he answered Abraham, as he answered Jesus' disciples at the Ascension, as he answered Augustine—with forgiveness of sin, with land and children, with provision and plenty, as the kingdom comes.

It won't come on your terms or at the times of your choosing. You will mourn and weep as surely as you will laugh and rejoice. But let God drive you, to the end of your wits, to the end of your rope, until you are

with all that you have, and then celebrate the resurrection, the fulfillment of life, every seventh day. Treasure the lessons of Abraham, of our Lord's Ascension, and of Augustine, because the kingdom of God is coming.

O Lord, pray tell, how long until we see the City of God; how long until we see the return of the Ascended One; how long until we graduate into the fullness of your kingdom; how long until we see the fulfillment of all our earthly labors; how long until we eat at the great banquet table with you?

O Lord, keep us in the Spirit of Christ until all is complete. Teach us how to pray; teach us how to give thanks; teach us how to redeem the earth.

O Lord, come quickly. Amen!