

STRATEGY FOR SANITY

Earl Palmer

Early this year I was the guest of the university students at the Bel Air Presbyterian Church in Los Angeles. During that informal evening meeting, Reverend Stephen Marsh, the university pastor, asked me to share only two pieces of advice with these UCLA students—the counsel of an older Christian to younger Christians. But Stephen left it up to me to select the two pieces.

It was not difficult to arrive at my first bit of advice for these young men and women. As of first importance I urged them to stay close to Jesus Christ, our great friend and foundation who stands beneath everything else. But how do we stay close to Jesus Christ? That evening we explored some of the ways: first, by our own decisions and acts of faith as we decide to stay close; second, because of grace, since Jesus Christ stays close to us.

My first counsel to the collegians, then, challenges each of us to grow our relationship with Jesus Christ through prayer, Bible study, and fellowship with other Christians so that there is a daily focusing of our minds, our hearts, our wills upon the faithfulness and goodness of God. This act of focusing steadies and integrates who we are so that we become whole persons. I urged these young friends to grow intellectually in their understanding of the character and teaching of Jesus Christ, just as they are growing in their academic studies and research. As an academic program demands intentional and directed study, so our faith in Jesus Christ deserves intentionality and consistent, daily growth in Christian character and belief. My advice was to make this growth in the knowledge of

the Lord (who is the center of our faith and of our life) the first mandate of our lives.

God's Will: A Respectable GPA

The second piece of advice took more time for me to settle on. I decided to urge these young men and women to take full advantage of what they are and where they are now as students. Be Christians where you now are, I exhorted them—which means that their ministry right now as Christian disciples is to be students. And that is no second-rate calling. What a time to be a collegian in this country!

There is a new shape to our world, a shape that makes their lives as students all the more strategic. 1989 was the year that began a new era, when the vast political-ideological monolith of Marxist-Leninism began to come apart and collapse from within. 1989 was the year of ordinary people who, in pro-democracy demonstrations in Poland, China, Romania, and throughout Eastern Europe, showed how deeply felt was their yearning for accountability in leaders and for personal freedom. These societies must have more permanent building blocks than the interim yearnings for freedom and the rage against previous injustice. When a revolution is over, the question is inevitably asked, "Now what? How are we now to live?"

As Christians worldwide have been a vital part of this pro-democracy movement, even so we have a crucially important role to play in the years ahead as the results of these events continue to unfold. At this time in history the Good News that we have to share is more needed than ever before, for this is a time of uneasy openness with vast ideological empty places;

people are more willing to really hear the Good News of Jesus Christ than ever before.

So I tried to be very practical in my advice to the UCLA students. Now, I reminded them, is the time to take every course they can take on the political and social changes in Asia, Europe, Latin America, Africa. Now is the time to take a key language of the future—Russian, Mandarin, Spanish, Arabic, Japanese. They should take advantage of the university's resources that will help them as Christians be statesmen and stateswomen among their contemporaries. Today's world needs Christians who will live in Eastern Europe or the Third World and share their faith, their love, their hope in Christ.

To do this they will need language and work skills that offer a logical reason for them to be in those key places. What they know about computers, chemistry, engineering, and languages may become their visa to the privilege of living and serving outside the U.S.

First Things First

The Law that has its fulfillment in Jesus Christ is that durable building cornerstone for human life. The traditions of justice that flow from the covenants of the Torah and the gospel of Christ become the solid building blocks for nations just as they are the foundations for individuals. Our task as Christians—whether as collegians or

youth ministers—is to share with this generation that good hope; but in order to share it, we must first know Christ ourselves and then accurately understand our world. Too, be careful that you do not substitute some other program—even a Christian program—that sabotages in us or in our students the unique advantages we have living in this age.

So I tried to be practical for the UCLA students. Now, I reminded them, is the time to take every course they can on the political and social changes in Asia, Europe, Latin America, Africa.

It is a fact that the wholeness and balance of people who are authentically appropriate to the real time and place where they now live are their essential Christian witness. My message to those UCLA collegians was simple: Be Christian students who study hard, who are well balanced, who grow spiritually and intellectually. Students of this sort have the most impact upon other students. While they have these years to be students, then, let them be students with their whole heart—and

let you be youth ministers with your whole heart, giving yourselves to your calling, your personal and professional mandate. Don't let anyone make you feel guilty about that calling, for the day-to-day process of fulfilling that mandate is the real world for you—more real, in fact, that you or anyone else would sometimes believe. ♦



Earl Palmer is pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Berkeley, California.