

Address to graduates at the 2012 Graduation ceremony of the South African Theological Seminary (SATS) by Dr Christopher Pepler, Founder and Chairman of the board.

If I asked you why you enrolled with SATS in the first place most of you would mention such things as; the convenience of being able to study at a distance, the excellent quality of the accreditation, or the fine curriculum and coursework. Some might even mention the fact that the academic faculty are so good looking. However, most of you would probably say that it was because we are theologically evangelical.

When SATS was founded, it was clear what the word 'evangelical' meant, but recently it has become so broadly defined that it no longer means what it used to. It no longer adequately defines our theological blood type. However, if you look at our website you will see that we define ourselves with the words; 'We are Bible-based, Christ-centred, Spirit-led, distance and online learning specialists, accredited to the PhD level. The last part of that statement speaks to what we do, but the first part speaks to who we are; Bible-based, Christ-centred, and Spirit-led. These are the three foundational principles on which we build SATS some 16 years ago; the unique authority of the Word of God the Father, the lordship and centrality of Jesus Christ, and the ministry of the Holy Spirit. We have tried to incorporate these three principles into the structure and content of our courses and assessment criteria.

In 1 Timothy 3:15 Paul refers to the church as the 'pillar and foundation of the truth' and we believe that these three foundational principles, these pillars of truth, need to be strengthened at the least, and in most cases restored to the church of our day. My hope is that you graduates will be ambassadors and evangelists for these three pillars, building them into your churches and ministries, and passing them on to all who you influence.

Of the three, Bible-based is the easiest to define and apply. Liberalism has mounted some serious assaults on the inspiration and authority of the Bible. I speak both of the liberalism of the 19th and 20th centuries but also of the current post-modern liberalism that calls itself a new kind of Christianity. At SATS we hold uncompromisingly to the belief that the Bible is inspired, authoritative, and fully trustworthy. We believe that our doctrine and practice must be Bible-based and by that we understand that our coursework must take its authority and prime source not from philosophy, science, or tradition, but from a responsible interpretation of what the Bible reveals. We hold our students to the same standard and insist that they support their essays and dissertations with responsible biblical analysis. They must be Bible-based; but of course as graduates you already know this only too well.

The Spirit-led pillar is also under attack in recent years. On the one hand the attack comes from a dead orthodoxy that effectively denies the manifest work of the Holy Spirit. On the other hand the assault comes from extreme signs and wonders advocates who tend to turn

the purported work of the Spirit into an unholy circus. To give full place to the ministry of the Holy Spirit in and through SATS is a more challenging task than being Bible-based. We have included the ministry of the Holy Spirit in subjects such as Christian Foundations, The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit, and the Book of Acts. We have also inserted into many of our other courses places where we ask the student to reflect and consider what the Spirit of God is saying to them and how He wants them to act on the information in the course. At an executive level, we also try to honour His ministry by seeking His guidance when we strategize, plan, and make important decisions.

The 3rd and central pillar of truth is Christocentricity – being Christ-centred. Jesus Christ is the head of the church and He is the full revelation of the triune Godhead. Colossians 1:19 has ‘God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him’ and Colossians 2:9 has, ‘for in Christ all the fullness of the deity lives in bodily form.’ Everything we are and do is for Him and through Him. He is our saviour and our Lord. The Holy Spirit points us to Him and the Father affirms Him to us. He is therefore our primary reference point for understanding life and must therefore also be our prime interpretive key to understanding the Bible.

J I Packer stated that Jesus saw himself as the key to scripture and the Old Testament as the key to understanding him. Karl Barth realised that he had to build Christian doctrine as exclusively and conclusively the doctrine of Christ. There is nothing particularly new about Christocentricity, but it seems to have been sorely neglected in our time.

Recently I have been engaging with the executives and academic team of SATS on the question of how we can give full honour to the lordship and centrality of Jesus Christ. One of the ways we, as a seminary, can do this is to formulate theology from a Jesus-centred perspective. For instance, we need to start the process of theological formulation with what Jesus taught or modelled concerning a particular subject. Then, we need to go to the Old Testament to understand why He said and did what He did. Then we need to consult the balance of the New Testament to better understand what He taught and modelled and to learn how to apply it. Dr Kevin Smith, our vice-principle, deals with this Christocentric theological model in Chapter 7 of his book ‘A practical guide for studying God’s Word’ and he also gives an excellent summary of it in his article in the current edition of *Conspectus*, our academic journal.

Another way we can honour this pillar of truth is to apply it in the way we interpret the Bible. I have written about this in edition 13, the latest issue, of *Conspectus* under the title, ‘The Christocentric Principle – a Jesus-centred hermeneutic’ Please would you read both of these articles by downloading them from our website or reading them online. In my article I define the Christocentric Principle as ‘a way of interpreting scripture primarily from the perspective of what Jesus taught and modelled, and from what He revealed concerning the nature, character, values, principles, and priorities of the Godhead.’ The word ‘primary’ is important because the Christocentric Principles does not exclude common exegetical tools such as context, language use, and so on. After carefully studying what the text means we

interpret it with reference to what Jesus did and said concerning the subject matter. However, we also interpret the text in the light of what Jesus revealed in His character and nature. Perhaps an example would help,

The story of the rich young ruler is recorded in Luke 18:18-30, and Matthew 19:16-26. Here a young man approached Jesus, addressed Him as 'good teacher' and asked what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus immediately challenged why he had addressed him as 'good' for surely only God is good. I think a fair paraphrase would be "young man, do you know who you are speaking to?" Then Jesus told him that he needed to keep the commandments and the young man responded that he had done this since an early age. When he heard this Jesus told him that one thing was still lacking and that he should sell all he had, give the proceeds to the poor and then come and follow him. This saddened the young man because he had considerable wealth and Jesus then used him as an example of how hard it was for the rich to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

In this story Jesus seems to come across as harsh, judgemental, and even somewhat crass. But if we interpret this passage this way then we are missing a lot. Our understanding of Jesus' nature and character revealed in other parts of the Gospels should immediately alert us to the fact that all is not what it seems to be. For instance, how did Jesus deal with the woman caught in adultery, or the Samaritan woman at the well?

I have purposely chosen this example because we don't have to guess at Jesus' attitude. Mark's Gospel records the same story but he adds seven vital words; 'Jesus looked at him and loved him' (Mark 10:21). The Lord Jesus was not rejecting the young man or merely using him as an object lesson, he was making him the offer of a lifetime. "Get rid of all your transient material baggage and come follow me the living God." What an offer!

So, dear graduates, my congratulations on obtaining your qualifications. My earnest request is that you become evangelists and ambassadors not only of SATS as an institution of higher learning, but of the three foundation principles we hold so dear – the pillars of truth; the three-fold strand of the SATS theological DNA – Christ-centred, Bible-based, and Spirit-led. My prayer is that you would apply these three principles in life, church, and ministry, and that you would influence others to do the same.