[The following is the convocation address given by Gordon H. Clark to the students and faculty of Covenant College in 1980.]

CONVOCATION ADDRESS

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An audience attending the opening convocation of a new college year naturally expect to hear some platitudinous advice directed to the innocent incoming freshman. The present audience may regret that they will not be disappointed, for the theme of this address is the opportunities, in many cases the unsuspected opportunities, which Covenant College presents to its students. Yet the incoming freshmen are not the only ones against whom these profundities are propelled. The new sophomores, with one less year before them, should be more seriously concerned. For the same reason the juniors should view their still shorter predicament with trepidation, and the seniors may stand aghast in desperation.

What opportunities the faculty members have is another matter.

Undoubtedly the incoming freshman have in mind certain goals and ambitions. That is why they came here. But it does not follow that everyone has identified or correctly evaluated the all too fleeting possibilities. It is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation that many students, not only freshmen but upperclassmen as well, overlook important matters, and, what is worse, fail to recognize that in four short years those opportunities shall have vanished forever. Then there will be weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth.

One of the advantages that Covenant College offers is the Bible curriculum. By faculty action no student can fail to take note of it. But the Bible department as such and its courses are not precisely what I now wish to recommend. In connection with them there is a slightly different opportunity whose temporary character is little recognized. It is the opportunity to memorize Scripture. Memorization is a fleeting opportunity. After graduation very few students – with perhaps the exception of those who go to Seminary – memorize anything. The cares of this life, if not the deceitfulness of riches, exclude memorization. One may state as a general rule that college is the last chance you will have to memorize Scripture.

That Scripture memorization is profitable and important should not need emphasis. Once my father had to conduct a funeral service, which to his surprise, was held in a room too dark for reading a print page. Fortunately he was able to quote a sufficient number of passages from memory.

Although in the future few of you will be conducting funeral services, at least not in unlighted rooms, nevertheless in the present, even before this day is done, all of you will pray. Many prayers suffer from one or more of several defects. One is a superabundance of petitions. Petitions are indeed an integral part of prayer, but probably no prayer, except some ejaculatory prayers, should be composed of nothing but petitions. Confession of sin should almost never be omitted. A second and more painful defect in too many prayers is crudity of language, interlarded with vague and meaningless phrases. To ask God for a blessing is to ask for nothing in particular. Note how insipid the Unity people are, when every morning on the radio they always have a special word and a very special speaker. Then there are juvenile prayers which repeat the adverb just six times in three short sentences, y'know. Similarly the term personal, often if not always, conveys no meaning. One Sunday morning in New York a thoroughly modernistic minister urged us who sat before him to have a personal relationship to Christ. This sounds good to unsuspecting Christians, but they fail to note that there are many types of personal relationships and personal commitments. There are many types of contracts and covenants. The important thing is not that there is a covenant; the important thing is what the terms of the covenant are.

A third defect in all too many contemporary prayers is a lack of reverence. If Malachi could castigate the Jews for treating God with less respect than they showed to their civil rulers, ought we not today approach God with more deference than we pay to human dignitaries? The short Lord's Prayer, which is our model, begins with two phrases of respectful address; then there are two petitions, not however for our own needs, but for God's glory; next come two short petitions for ourselves; and the prayer ends with an ascription of praise. Or, if one wish a longer model, there is Solomon's prayer of dedication. In such passages we find suitable phraseology for a reverent prayer to God. Finally, the heirs of the Covenanters, which we claim to be, should not need to be reminded of the most extensive and most appropriate source for the language of prayer: the Psalms. My dear young friends, Memorize the Psalms. The use of the Psalms in prayer will eliminate all three of these defects.

There are other advantages in knowing the Scriptures by heart. One's memory can become a most convenient concordance. But the main point in this convocation address is not the benefits of memorization; rather it is the warning that the short four years at college are your last opportunity to memorize.

The multi-faceted purpose of a college is not restricted to the direct study of the Scriptures. College, as I see it, is a four page table of contents, and no more than a table of contents, of the intellectual endeavors of mankind. Modern science is of course indebted to the Einstein of 1905; but its roots and motivation go back to Galileo. The dominant form of modern so-called Christianity depends on Kierkegaard, and on Schleiermacher before him. Old Testament criticism did not originate a hundred years ago with Wellhausen, but with Astruc in the eighteenth century, or even with Spinoza in the seventeenth. The contemporary liberal Jewish theologian, Abraham J. Heschel, in his work on The Prophets, cites Spinoza a half dozen times. Behind these men and controlling their development were, to mention on a few, Locke, Augustine, and Aristotle. This is the world of scholarship in which a college education plays the role of a kindergarden, or at most a first grade.

One need not suppose that every Christian must pursue the life of scholarship. God has given some people ten talents, while to others he has given only two or one. I am happy to see the proprietor of the Chinese restaurant down the mountain reading his Chinese Bible as he sits at his cash register. Every one of use who drives a car would be happy to know an honest and capable Christian auto-mechanic. Such are honorable activities in which a Christian can acceptably serve the Lord. But we have not chosen to be a restauranteur or a garage owner. We have chosen the life of an intellectual. This life is also acceptable with the Lord; it is more influential, and perhaps more dangerous as well, for unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall much be required.

To contribute to the scholarship that gives a civilization its form, and controls the thinking of millions upon millions of people, even when they are unaware of the sources of their thought, a student must take advantage of the opportunity for memorization that four years of college provide. Another basic example needs emphasis, for it is an opportunity that the student will never again enjoy. I refer to the study of foreign languages. If one reply that it is possible to learn a foreign language after graduating from college, two facts may be pointed out: first, the exigencies of the post-graduate life render it extremely unlikely that anyone will find time to do so; and second, though a student may be forced to learn a foreign language in graduate school to earn his Ph.D., he must do so on his own without credit. College is one's last chance for academic credit in these subjects. Learning them is mainly a matter of memorization, and practically nobody memorizes anything after college.

Many entering freshman will fail to recognize the importance of what I am saying. Let me

therefore use a personal illustration. My very first assignment in Graduate School was to read a 300 page book in German. It was a critical study of Dionysius the Areopagite, and there neither was then nor is there now any English translation. Besides the German, Dionysius, you will remember – of course you don't remember – wrote in Greek, as did Proclus from whom he plagiarized several sections.

The reason why the students could read the assigned material was not precisely that they were college graduates. A prior reason was that they had attended good High Schools. Very few of the entering freshman today, and very few of the upperclassmen as well, have had the advantage of a good high school education. I do not say this to irritate you or to belittle you. It is not your fault. Liberal politicians and the humanistic NEA have substituted socialistic indoctrination and immoral ethics for solid academic learning. I am informed that High School diplomas are now blank and no longer carry any printed statement – because Johnny can't read. That is supposed to be a joke. But it was no joke that I tried to tutor a High School senior in reading English, and it took us a good hour to get through one short paragraph in a sixth grade reading book.

Permit the personal illustration of graduate school requirements to continue on the High School level for a moment. Not having received proper parental guidance from my father, though he had an advanced degree from Edinburgh, I chose to go to a manual training high school. I spoiled many a block of wood in the carpentry shop; I designed ornamental iron work that would have caused New Orleans to gasp in horror; and there was mechanical drawing, which strangely I did not like. But that same Manual Training High School gave me four years of math, four years of history, and of course English. They required me to take a year of Physics, and in one semester of Chemistry I learned why magnesium is so useful on the Fourth of July, filling the laboratory with smoke. In zoology I became an expert in supplying the class with crickets.

On the basis of my limited information I doubt that any high schools today provide such a good scientific curriculum. Today Soviet secondary education surpasses American education by eight years of geometry, four years of physics, three years of chemistry, three and half years of biology, and one year of astronomy. In the Soviet Union each year over five million secondary school graduates have had a two-year course in calculus, whereas in the United states about 100,000 have had one year. Furthermore, 98% of the school population in Russia completes secondary school compared with 75% here.

Public education in the United States is a disgrace – even though I do not approve of the Soviet

exclusive attention to the sciences. The Russian system seems woefully lacking in history, literature, and languages. My Manual Training High School gave me four years of Latin, three years of Greek, and three years of French. I continued all these in college and added German and Hebrew.

Let me repeat: I do not say this to praise myself and much less to belittle you. My aim is to condemn the American public school system under which you have been cheated out of a proper preparation for college. College is now your last chance. Your opportunity to become capable of influencing large numbers of the succeeding generation ends right here at Covenant College. To exaggerate only a little bit, Christian devotion consists in the devoted memorization of the Greek irregular verbs; and your advance in sanctification is measured by your grade-point average.

So much for the students. At the beginning of this address I remarked that the opportunities and responsibilities of the faculty members were another matter. This too must be mentioned, for no one wishes to slight the faculty. Somewhere in the official documents of the College the responsibilities of the faculty are defined as teaching the students. Well, of course. Covenant College was founded to teach students. That is what we faculty people get paid for. And I do not believe that there is even one professor here who does less than his very best. But I also strongly insist that such is not the faculty's only obligation nor the College's only function.

The other function is publication. In the smaller institutions one finds a certain number of people who think publication is inconsistent with good teaching. Quite the contrary, the professor who publishes keeps mentally alert so that his teaching is not the transference of his notes to the notes of the student without their passing through the mind of either one. Because publication enhances teaching, it attracts better students. The more intelligent high school graduates will compare the competence of faculties before making their choice among them; and their comparisons will depend largely on publications.

Increasing the enrollment, however, is not a very laudable motivation for scholarly productivity. Those who have a message for the world find that publication is far more effective than teaching. For example, Plato and Aristotle taught students, but very few people know the students' names or their accomplishments. These two teachers, on the other hand, have controlled or contributed to the thinking of millions of people by reason of the books they wrote. David Hume, who had no students, is the foundation of much of American philosophy and science today. We too shall be known by what we publish, and if we do not publish, we shall perish, and the place thereof shall know us no more.

Would you be so kind as to make an easy calculation. Being some years older than the present students, you, the faculty, presumably learned a little arithmetic before the educationists abolished it. The calculation is this: as professors we may meet fifty new students each year. To avoid any surreptitious magnifications of the argument, let us say we meet 100 new students each year. At the end of ten years we shall have lectured to one thousand students. Now, it is not too much to suppose that a professor can write a book in that period of time. A good scholarly book will reach no less than five thousand people in the ten years that follow its publication, and later years will supply other readers. Even a poor book will reach at least 2000 people. This is twice as many as the students the professor will have had in class. After the professor's first publication, his production will improve in quality and in frequency. Easy arithmetic and obvious history show that we can do ten times as much good by writing as by teaching. For the Christian faculty of Covenant College I insist that publication is not merely an opportunity but a Christian responsibility.

There is not much likelihood that any of us will achieve the status of Plato, Augustine, Calvin, or even of Carl Henry. But our opportunity and our responsibility require us to do our very best.