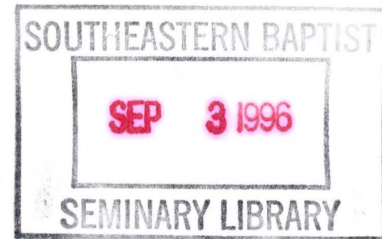


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Patterson Commissions Southeastern Graduates To A Labor Of Love

By Lee Weeks

WAKE FOREST, N.C.-- Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary awarded degrees May 18 to 127 students representing 21 states.

But before issuing their diplomas, Seminary President Paige Patterson administered one more final exam.

"Why on earth are you here? Patterson asked rhetorically. "Why have you come to this place?"

"Why have you committed yourself to a professional commitment in which you know going in that you are going to be abused and misused"? Patterson queried. "The pastor after all is the only employee that some people have, so they often treat him in that way."

Although the seminary graduates have achieved more academic credentials than most people ever will, Patterson said, the Wake Forest, N.C. seminary Class of 1996 -- the largest since May 1990 -- is destined for a career filled with want and sacrifice.

"You have chosen a profession that will leave you much of your life wondering whether or not you will be able to pay your bills at the end of the month," Patterson predicted. "Why have you chosen this way when you know good and well that you may be transported on the wings of the call of God to one of the most remote sectors of the earth? You may have to leave family behind and you may spend most of your days unknown, unsung and you may even die with few taking notice. Why would you do a thing like that?"

With these earned degrees, Patterson said, come all rights and privileges to be hurt and mistreated by the very people these graduates seek to help and comfort.

"Why would you want to do something which when you are doing well with somebody they often are offended at the very effort you make to save them or to point them in a direction that is happier?"

"Why on earth would you like to come here and make preparation for anything that is as I have described it?"

For the answers to these soul searching questions, Patterson pointed the graduates to the example left by the Apostle Paul.

"Maybe you have chosen this way because the reward of God happens to matter to you more than the rewards of men," Patterson said.

Reading from Philippians 3:7-11, Patterson quoted Paul saying: "For what things were gained to me, these I have counted

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loss for Christ. ... I also count all things loss for the excellency of his knowledge of Christ Jesus, my Lord. For whom I have suffered the loss of all things and count them all dung that I may gain Christ."

Referring to Philipians 3:10, Patterson reminded the packed Binkley Chapel audience, that the glory of Christ is precipitated by His suffering.

"Some people want to know the power of His resurrection without knowing the fellowship of His suffering," remarked Patterson. "But dear friend the power of His resurrection is given so that you will have the power to walk through the valley of the shadow of death and fear no evil. The power of the resurrection is given to you so that you will not quake with fear when He spreads before you a table in the presence of your enemies."

Calling the ministry a "labor of love," Patterson assured the black-robed graduates that they had been "uniquely prepared" for their calling "both in heart and mind -- to count it all loss in order that you may gain Christ and hear Him say 'well done thou good and faithful servant.'"

Most seminary graduates earned the master of divinity degree. Other degrees granted included the doctor of ministry, master of theology, master of arts in Christian education and associate of divinity.

Seven graduates received bachelor of arts degrees in biblical studies from Southeastern Baptist Theological College, which was established in January 1995.

