

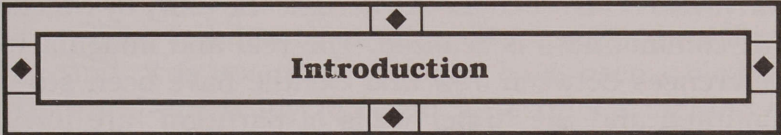


Sermons

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## **Walk as Children of Light\*** **Ephesians 5:6-14**



### **Introduction**

It is my pleasure to welcome each of you to this academic year, 1985-86. This is an historic period which will engage all of us—faculty, administration and students—for the challenge of implementing a new curriculum.

This improved learning process envisions several features: First, it integrates all of the theological disciplines so that your education is holistic. Second, through the “Foundations for Ministry” experience, you will be equipped to explore the depths of your religious inquiry. Third, this curriculum is constructed to enable you and the faculty to evaluate your readiness for ministry. Fourth, your presence here as prospective leaders is conceived to help you “walk as children of light.”

Throughout the Bible we are confronted with admonitions to “walk as children of light.” This concept reflects a Zoroastrian dualism between good and evil, right and wrong, light and darkness. A similarity is observed during the Christian era in Gnosticism, a viewpoint that creates an inseparable dualism between spirit and matter, mind and body.

Paul considers himself an apostle to the Gentiles. His letter to the Church at Ephesus, like the one to the Colossians, is a theological treatise designed to exalt the name of Jesus Christ. “In the fullness of time,” says Paul, “God was pleased to dwell in Jesus as the ultimate sign of reconciliation in the world and God’s plan for the salvation of the world.”

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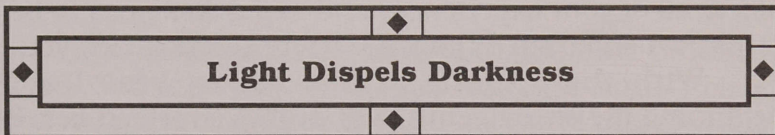
\*September 1985

This letter to the Ephesians is testimony that in Jesus Christ God breaks the barriers dividing humankind. The disunity upon which our humanity seems to thrive has been broadened to become the unity by which our commonness is realized. The real and imaginary differences between Jew and Gentile have been surmounted and the "inner walls of partition" are torn down. Prior to the appearance of Jesus this was not possible. Life without Jesus Christ was a life of separation. Jesus came, lived among us and died as our example. His life is the ushering in of a new light, one previously unknown. His life is a role model of joy and sublime fulfillment which is ours if we "walk in that light." His death is the test whereby those who find renewal participate in life beyond death and the grave.

Thus, when Paul speaks of "walking in the light," he is not dredging useless philosophical arguments about the relative value of light over darkness, good versus evil, right as opposed to wrong, mind over body. Paul is saying that light is the product of action and the result of truth. This reality is more than intellectual assent to one concept or another; it prods us into action, affirming our commitment.

Beginning this school year, "walk as children of light." This is the mission of ITC as a graduate professional school. It is a graduate school which admits persons who have achieved a baccalaureate degree. Also, it is a graduate school because its curriculum equips persons with the necessary tools for theological pursuits beyond the M.Div. Further, ITC is a professional school where the vast majority of its graduates will be in ministry: preachers, counselors, missionaries, executives. Because this is true, course offerings must prepare our students for such service.

There are assumptions made of those who attend a seminary or graduate professional school, as opposed to the graduate school of a major university. First, it is assumed that you are committed to the church and are willing to subject yourself to the church's discipline. Second, it is assumed that you have been called by God and are ready to begin an arduous lifetime of preparation for your particular ministry. Third, it is assumed that one is ready to change one's lifestyle: *away* with undue ostentation, *away* with dishonesty, *away* with self-aggrandizement, *away* with sloth, *away* with minimal goals. It is assumed that God calls persons who are willing to walk in the splendor of God's marvelous light for the church's varied ministries. That light dispels darkness; that light drives shadows to their proper perspective; that light in Jesus Christ creates a climate in which maximum growth occurs. Briefly, now, a word about each of these aspects of "walking as children of light."



The primary purpose of your seminary preparation is to acquire and internalize a body of theological and related disciplines, enabling effective leadership for those you will serve upon graduation. The curriculum of ITC seeks to combine the best of theological thought through the ages, bringing it to bear upon your preparation for ministry. It is an appropriate wedding of the best of classical, philosophical and theoretical understandings with the best of contemporary thought and practice. It seeks to avoid fads but is open to the piercing glare of new light and new understandings.

A true academic community is one in which all segments of the community are learners. The majority of ITC's faculty have attained the terminal degree in their disciplines. This faculty has reached the point of knowing the right questions to ask and have disciplined their minds to organize themselves to seek answers to these issues. We expect the faculty of ITC to be more productive in raising and answering yet unasked and unanswered questions related to the sum total of theological education, especially to the Black Religious Experience. Faculties are more than dispensers of historical truths; they are contemporary theological resources for the entire church.

As a true academic community, students are expected to be excited learners, serious probers and rigorous scholars. The learners here are adults, averaging thirty years of age. Many of you come to seminary after successful and unsuccessful flirtations with other endeavors. For good or ill, the ITC student is not a blank piece of paper upon arrival at this sacred place. All of your experiences and exposures need to be unpacked and used by you and by those who teach you.

With the opening of this school year I am beginning my seventeenth year at ITC, fourteen years as Dean of Johnson C. Smith Seminary and two years as President. Please indulge me in some fairly caustic observations:

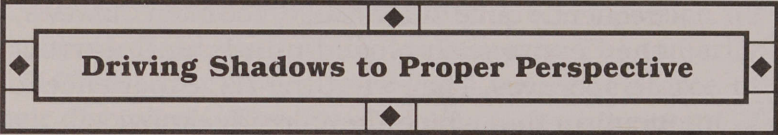
- Many of our students come to seminary from a lifetime of participation in church-school study and expect serious theological education here to be supportive of the "unquestioned variety" as that of their Sunday School classes.
- Many of our students have held pastorates,

frequently quite successfully. Too often, however, they come with closed minds and narrow perspectives. They want the ITC experience to confirm that which they already know.

- Many of our students view their study as the union card fulfilling denominational requirements, rather than the start of a pilgrimage toward excellence and lifelong study. You can discern this by the number of students who never visit the library, reading only limited opinions of a particular author of a textbook.
- Too many of our students are governed by low expectations. They often balk when forced to stretch their minds to new vistas.
- Too many of our students arrive with poor grammatical study and research tools, resources not acquired in college or in the lower grades. To enter with such deficiencies is problematic; to leave without correcting those weaknesses is criminal.

Do not think that I have observed only problem areas. Nothing could be further from the truth. I have said here and elsewhere around the world that ITC has some of the finest students to be found anywhere. You have but to look at some of our graduates to realize their unlimited potential. I raise these issues because I want you to know that, where you are concerned, I have high expectations. I expect you to be outstanding while you are here and prominent leaders upon leaving.

You should know that nothing short of your best will please your President. I have not learned to make common cause with mediocrity, and you are expected to provide the light that will dispel darkness here and elsewhere.



**Driving Shadows to Proper Perspective**

The purpose of the systematic, rigorous and contemporary discipline to which you are being subjected is to give you a body of knowledge to drive the shadows of ignorance into their proper perspective. The Black Church and the Black Community have never needed better educated clergypersons than today. Many people are being confused as they live their lives in these highly automated days. Rather than put on their thinking caps and delve below the surface of highly illogical and dangerous rhetoric, they are totally adopting some spurious beliefs. Your task, then, is to drive these shadows into their proper perspective. Light has a way of doing this.

One of my favorite reading assignments in college as a philosophy major was Plato's *Allegory of the Cave* which discusses a prisoner chained in a dark cave with his back to the entrance. As humans and animals passed in front of the cave, the shaft of light penetrating its entrance formed shadows of the reality outside the cave. The prisoner had only shadows of reality to comprehend. Upon being released, he was not able to distinguish between shadows and reality.

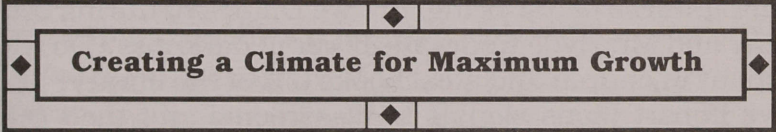
This, ITC, is our most profound calling. If we "walk in the light," as Christ is the light, then we will be about the business of bringing light to the shadows of reality that characterize so much of life today. It is shadowy to think that five million white South Africans have a right to withhold justice and citizenship from twenty-two million Black South Africans. It is a distortion of reality to allow anyone to tell us that all we have to do is wait for the privileged in South Africa to disseminate



their power with the waiting majority. This is called "constructive engagement." In fact, it is "destructive disintegration."

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the most powerful force known to humankind. It is a light that illumines and exposes darkness and is couched in historical, linguistic and contemporary context, requiring a scholarly approach to bring the events of the first century into twentieth-century relevance. And yet, for those who have eyes to see, ears to hear, minds to discern—this Gospel is as contemporary as today's newspaper. How often today are the poor being sold for a piece of silver? How often are the scales being rigged to rob farm lands from unsuspecting Blacks? How frequently do we neglect the rehabilitative features of our prison system so that the prisons become revolving doors? What about school classrooms that damage one's psyche rather than encourage effective self-imaging?

While at ITC I hope that you will become so well informed about the Bible, history, theology, education, ethics, ecumenical studies, mission and pastoral psychology that you will make a career out of challenging and destroying myths, illumining the distortions of shadows and bringing the piercing light of God's love to the world. It is still true that when you "walk in the light," shadows recede.



**Creating a Climate for Maximum Growth**

Several years ago Mrs. Costen and I took a driving vacation in the western United States. One of the many exciting and phenomenal occurrences we saw

concerned the giant redwood and sequoia trees in northern California and Oregon. We visited a redwood forest and were awed as we saw one particular tree named, "Searching for Light," which had a lower trunk about the size in diameter of a telephone pole. As the tree grew it was crowded out by the larger trees, unable to receive the necessary sunlight for maximum growth.

Amazingly, the tree bent to the left at a full forty-five degree angle and grew sideways for about fifteen feet. Growing to a point in full view of the sun's light, it again turned skyward and grew to a height of almost two hundred feet with a girth of almost eight feet.

When you "walk in the light," you enhance your chances for maximum growth. The light keeps you from being dwarfed by negative influences. The redwood tree is a reminder of how we need to turn from the forces that pull us toward negativism and find the space we need for greatest growth in positive circumstances. Jesus Christ is the light that will provide this environment.

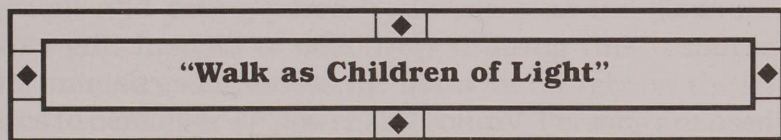
Here at ITC our ethos is four-fold: **honesty, integrity, industry** and **commitment**. These are the characteristics providing potential development.

**Honesty** deals with our personal and corporate selves. Are we true to the best that is within us? Do we know who we are and do we live up to who we are? The communities we will serve need honest role models.

**Integrity** is the soundness of our character, the uprightness of our being. Are we Dr. Jekyll during the day and Mr. Hyde under the cover of darkness? Do we shout in church and steal books out of the library? Do we impart pious signals in classrooms and then get high on pot or cocaine in the dormitories? Does our work mean anything or do we promise anything and fulfill nothing. The Black Church needs men and women of integrity, not more charlatans.

**Industry** determines our willingness to work hard to achieve. Most of what we attain results from perspiration and not inspiration. You will provide the religious model for over half of all Black Americans. I pray that your example inspires lofty heights and not merely minimal production. Let it be said of ITC graduates that they are about the full-time business of ministry.

While here at ITC it is my hope that your **commitment** is to each other and to God. You do not live in isolation but in a group. When you entrust yourselves to others, you become a team player and recognize the value of group growth. You want to contribute your best so that the group can develop. Then, as Christians, our ultimate responsibility is to God as we have come to know God in Jesus Christ.



Walk in such a way that it becomes obvious that you have been exposed to the light that dispels darkness. *“Walk as children of light.”* Walk with such confidence and dedication that you position yourselves to place the murky shadows of life in perspective. *“Walk as children of light.”* Walk as one who seeks personal growth and enables others to achieve their potential. *“Walk as children of light.”*

