

Williams Way Leadership

The following manuscript is the Convocation Address given by Dr. Stan Norman, president of Williams Baptist University, on August 25, 2021.

Introduction

Convocation is the time when a university officially recognizes the start of an academic year. Convocations not only commemorate beginnings, but also set a tone, or more specifically, a focus, for the university. I pray my remarks provide a clear direction for all of us for this year, and hopefully, beyond.

This morning, I want to address the issue of purpose. That is, I want to talk about the purpose of this university and how the purpose of this institution intersects with the purpose of everyone at this school.

A Campus of Christian Purpose – Building Leaders

An ongoing issue for institutions like ours deals with our purpose – why do schools like ours exist? Many Christian colleges and universities fall into the trap of attempting to replicate the mission of secular institutions of higher education. These institutions find the larger platforms, programs, and government resources and funding appealing, and as such, these Christian schools begin to pursue these things, thereby drifting from their founding purpose and worldview commitments. *When Christian universities start down this path, they begin a journey from which they will never return, compromising their distinctive purpose and losing their institutional soul.*

Williams Baptist University is not like secular, state institutions – and we do not want to be. We have a distinctive purpose, with distinctively Christian commitments and expressions. We have a unique purpose – one that I wish to highlight for this convocation as well as challenge for you to embrace.

Our mission is not simply to provide four years of liberal arts education so that you can complete your studies, graduate, and get a better job, although these are admirable goals. Our purpose is not to imitate the beliefs and practices of secular, state schools with value-added programs, like chapel, Bible studies, mission trips, etc.

Our mission is to provide an excellent, holistically Christian liberal arts education, while compassionately shaping students' lives. Our vision is to produce exceptional graduates prepared to competently engage local and global cultures through a Christ-centered worldview. These are the formal statements of the purpose of our school.

But let me summarize these formal statements into more practical expressions – to state in plain terms the purpose of this school and thereby its purpose for each of us. *Williams Baptist University exists to equip and mobilize Christian leaders to influence our world with the Gospel for the glory of God.* Our mission is to prepare transformational leaders. In other words, the purpose of Williams is *to train you to be leader* and then to send you into the world *to lead*.

To state the matter bluntly, I believe the need for leaders is as great as it has ever been, yet we are living in a time when good leaders are in short supply. Leadership matters – leaders shape all facets of life and culture. Leaders change the world. This is the need for this hour.

But, we ***do not*** need more leaders like what we see in our world today. We need a different kind of leader – we need transformational leaders. We need leaders who define themselves and their mission in terms of the person and work of Jesus Christ.

I believe the purpose of Williams is to create leaders. I believe this university was founded to create the kind of leader who makes a difference for the glory of God and the good of creation. I believe our Lord is looking for men and women to be strong leaders, and my prayer is He is equipping you to be that kind of leader.

Our collegiate context is the platform by which we equip and mobilize you to be leaders of influence in whatever area and in every area where God calls you. Our mission is to change our world, to make a difference, by preparing a new generation of leaders – men and women with the biblical conviction to stand for and do what is right, even in the face of incredible forces that push back against them. This is why we are here, and I hope this is why you are here.

Leaders Come from Unexpected People! – Lessons from Esther

Leadership matters. Leaders make a difference. Leaders bring change. And, leaders come from unexpected people in unexpected ways.

No one ever asks to be placed in perils or trials or challenges – yet we often find ourselves in situations not of our own making. This is the world in which we are living today. And this was the world of Queen Esther.

Esther lived in the period after the Babylonian exile when Persia had replaced Babylon as the ruling power. Her story is set in the Persian capital of Susa, during the reign of King Ahasuerus (also known as Xerxes I) (486–464 B.C.). Some Jews had returned to Jerusalem where they enjoyed a reasonable amount of control over their own affairs. Others, like Esther were still in exile. As a minority group, the Jews were viewed with suspicion and often faced threats to their existence.

The Jewish people of that period were an ethnic, social, and political minority. They were a perceived threat to many who opposed their presence in the land, and evil persons conspired to eliminate the Jews. As a result, a legal decree was issued in Susa ordering the destruction of the Jewish people in Persia. A Jewish leader named Mordecai (Esther's cousin and guardian) sent a messenger to Esther with a copy of the decree along with a plea for Esther to use her platform as queen to do something about the danger facing her people. Mordecai urged Esther to approach the king to implore his favor and plead with him to save the Jews from annihilation.

The messenger went and related Mordecai's plea to Esther, and she sent the following response back to Mordecai (Esther 4:10-11):

“All the royal officials and the people of the royal provinces know that one law applies to every man or woman who approaches the king in the inner courtyard and who has not been summoned — the death penalty — unless the king extends the gold scepter, allowing that person to live. I have not been summoned to appear before the king for the last thirty days.”

Mordecai's response to Esther was a personal challenge her to rise to the occasion – to be a leader to do something about the situation.

“Don't think that you will escape the fate of all the Jews because you are in the king's palace. If you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will come to the Jewish people from another place, but you and your father's family will be destroyed. Who knows, perhaps you have come to your royal position for such a time as this.” (Esther 4:13-14)

“For Such a Time as This” – The Unexpected Leader

The phrase “for such a time as this” seems to capture the moment in which we are living. God is raising up for leaders to do something about the direction we as a civilization are moving – to do something about the way things are. *Our first leadership principle is that God prepares and calls leaders from unexpected place, in unexpected ways.*

My challenge for us today is to realize our personal calling and responsibility to rise to the occasion – you are the unexpected leader, *for such a time as this!*

“I Did Not Sign Up for This – I Did Not Come Here for This”

You may be listening to this and thinking, “Well, I did not come here for this. I came here to study, to focus on my area of interest. I came here to compete in athletics or play in the band, or to have fun and be with my friends. I did not sign up for this leadership stuff.”

I get that, but God's people often find themselves in trials not of their own making. God's people are often confronted with obstacles others have created – challenges that require God's people to do something. We are in one of those moments, and the times and situation demand that someone steps up and leads – likely an unexpected leader – you.

This was the case with Esther. She unexpectedly found herself in marriage she did not choose. She unexpectedly gained a platform of power and influence. She unexpectedly found herself in a culture that placed her and her people in a dire, dangerous situation. The situation demanded someone do something – that an unexpected leader, Esther, be the one to do something.

Esther discovered that God had been imperceptibly and providentially preparing her to be the “unexpected someone to do something;” as *the unexpected someone* to shine God’s light in the darkness; as *the unexpected someone* to stand against the spiritual darkness that threatened to destroy her people. Esther did not sign up for the challenges that confronted her; rather, the challenges arose despite her desires and expectations. And yet, Esther exemplified courageous faith, she rose to the occasion, and she led boldly and faithfully.

Although her life situation and context were unique to Esther, the realities of living in a fallen, sinful world are not. Like Esther, we are living in times that demand someone does something about the situation in which we find ourselves. The dynamics of living in a fallen world and engaging with perilous circumstances have always been true of God’s people – people like Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, David, Daniel, Ezekiel, Jeremiah; people like Joseph and Mary, Peter, James, John, Paul, and so on. Confronting the evil and pain of a fallen world has always been true of God’s people.

We do not create these situations, but we are called to engage and seek the redemption of these situations.

- *Like Esther, we live in situations not of our own making.*
- *Like Esther, we may feel like exiles in our own land.*
- *Like Esther, we are living in dire situations that grow more perilous each day.*
- *Like Esther, our times demand that someone does something; that someone does something to confront evil; that someone does something to shine God’s light in the darkness; that someone does something to push against the moral and spiritual decay that threatens to overrun and overtake us.*

Your purpose at Williams is to learn how to lead, to be equipped to be the unexpected leader that does something about the way things are. God is calling you to be an unexpected leader!

Leaders in Training – Keep Your Focus on Your Purpose

Leadership matters. Leaders make a difference. Leaders bring change. Let’s look at the life of a wall-builder named Nehemiah for our next lesson on leadership (Nehemiah 6:1-4)

When Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem the Arab, and the rest of our enemies heard that I had rebuilt the wall and that no gap was left in it — though at that time I had not installed the doors in the city gates — Sanballat and Geshem sent me a message: “Come, let’s meet together in the villages of the Ono Valley.” They were planning to harm me.

*So I sent messengers to them, saying, “**I am doing important work and cannot come down. Why should the work cease while I leave it and go down to you?**” Four times they sent me the same proposal, and I gave them the same reply.*

Our Task – Keep Your Focus on Your Purpose!

If the leadership lesson we learned from Esther was that God calls and equips unexpected people to lead, the leadership lesson we can learn from Nehemiah deals with focus. Nehemiah's task was to rely upon God *to overcome the obstacles and trials that threatened to distract him from his calling* to rebuild God's people. Nehemiah felt a burden and calling to rebuild God's people living in Jerusalem and the surrounding area (1:1-2, 11; 2:4-5). The platform of his work was to rebuild the wall of the city; the goal was to rebuild God's people.

“Come Down from the Wall!” – Distractions from Purpose

Nehemiah faced numerous challenges and obstacles that, in and of themselves, would pose significant distractions. Nehemiah faced numerous challenges that threatened to distract him from his leadership mission. Nehemiah had to manage resource shortages. He also confronted various emotional/psychological struggles: fear (2:2b; 4:14); temptation to be overwhelmed by the magnitude of the task (2:11-17); discouragement and intimidation (6:8-9, 10-13)

Nehemiah had to deal with distractions from his enemies. Three primary individuals (Sanballot, Tobiah, and Geshem) regularly attempted to distract God's leader from God's mission. The various type of opposition Nehemiah had to overcome from his enemies included: ridicule, derision, mockery (2:19-20; 4:1-3); verbal and written personal attacks (6:17); questioning the adequacy his efforts (“what you are doing doesn't matter;” “what you are doing will not last”); rumors and false accusations (6:10-13); and hostility and physical threats (4:8, 19-23; 6:1-7).

Opposition and distraction also arose from within the community of faith. Nehemiah had to address: exploitation of others for personal agendas and personal benefit (5:1-13); different levels of commitment to the cause from community members (5:14-18); some workers willing to make great sacrifices and work hard; others, not so much; some community members viewing their work on the wall as God's mission for them as a calling; others, not so much. The most significant issue confronting Nehemiah that threatened to distract from the mission were the sinful attitudes and actions among God's people. (9:1-37; 13:1-30).

“Come Down from the Wall!” – Overcoming Distractions

Leaders must overcome the distractions that tempt them away from their purpose. For our college community, the temptations and distractions are similar in kind to Nehemiah's but unique to you students in expression. The “come down from the wall” distractions can include personal struggles:

- *“I don't have enough money – I come from modest means.”*
- *“I am afraid”*
- *“I am overwhelmed” (“I just cannot do this!”)*
- *“I am discouraged”*
- *“I am fatigued/weary”*

Like Nehemiah, we may be facing distractions in the form of opposition from people who dislike us or oppose our walk of faith. These may include people ridiculing and mocking us. The modern version of a unkind or abusive forms of written derision are often found in social media postings. Like Nehemiah, we may have individuals or groups who question our adequacy:

- *“You aren’t up to the task”*
- *“What you are doing doesn’t matter”*
- *“You are a nobody doing nothing of consequence”*
- *“What you are doing doesn’t make a difference”*

Godly leaders learn stay on the wall when facing rumors and false accusations. Godly leaders stay on the wall when others try to intimidate them. Godly leaders stay on the wall when confronted by hostilities and even threats of harm.

Godly leaders understand that not everyone in their family or community of faith will share their commitments and beliefs. They must endure exploitation for personal agendas/benefits. They must learn to overcome betrayal. Godly leaders must navigate differing levels of commitment or differing expectations to the mission. Godly leaders must stay on the wall while dealing with sinful actions and attitudes among those they lead.

Leadership Lessons – Dealing with Distractions from Purpose

Leaders who embody a “stay on the wall” focus have an honest assessment of their work and the challenges. Focused leaders do not ignore these realities. Instead, they seek solutions to the challenges as they continue to move forward with the mission. Focus leaders also make a conscious, intentional commitment to the lead. They understand God’s leadership calling and purpose for their lives, and they learn what their leadership gifts are and cultivate those gifts.

Focused leaders also understand that leadership requires selfless sacrifice – godly leaders make sacrifices. In addition, godly leaders assemble a leadership team around them, relying on one another for mutual encouragement. This is the “I have your back, and you have my back” principle. And finally, prayer and confession of sin are non-negotiable traits for godly leaders. Sin always distracts us from our mission and will derail the life of a godly leader. Leaders who “stay on the wall” are people of committed prayer. Confession of sin ensures our ongoing fellowship and communion with God. Without these, our leadership is pointless and futile.

Building Leaders the Williams Way

Using the analogy of building a wall, several bricks are essential for Williams in our mission to equip and mobilize you as a leader. These “leadership bricks” include faith (biblical convictions; Christ-centered worldview formation); academics/learning; athletics; the performing arts (music, theater, art, etc.); extra-curricular activities; and related to our Williams Works initiative, old-fashioned hard work. These are the elements we use to build you, our students, into Williams Way leaders.

As you know, I have been speaking a great deal for a many months about the Williams Way. These are traits I have gleaned from the history of WBU – dispositions that have marked the men and women who have studied here and who have worked here. The Williams Way traits are how we measure leadership here at WBU.

- *Christ-centered purpose – an identity and purpose embedded in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ*
- *Unwavering tenacity – a persistent refusal to quit; to persist unwaveringly, sustained by God’s power & provision*
- *Courageous faith – bold actions driven by a biblically-grounded faith*
- *Selfless sacrifice – willingness to make sacrificial commitments, even at great personal expense*
- *Vocational mission – a sense of God’s call to serve through work*

As a university, these five traits are what we seek to instill in you – to equip you to be this kind of leader.

“For Such a Time as This” – This is Our Time to Lead

It’s on us – there is not a somebody else, somewhere else, some other person who is going to show up and confront the challenges before us. There is no cavalry riding in to save the day – we are the cavalry!

The times demand that someone does something – and I believe each of us is that someone. God in His providential wisdom ordained that this generation of Christians be the leaders who do something about the way things are.

And more specifically, that we on this campus – those of us committed to the mission of Williams – we are the people are ordained by God to faithfully advance the mission of Williams as our call – to be leaders who do something about the way things are.

Cultural movements or political activism (voting for the “right” political party) will not bring the change our nation needs. I believe political involvement is a necessary, important civic responsibility. And, I believe cultural engagement is essential for confronting and overcoming the challenges before us. God’s people must be in the political and cultural arenas of our world. The gospel requires our engagement in these spheres of human existence.

These expressions in and of themselves, however, will not bring the changes we desperately need for our families, our churches, our communities, our nation, and our world. What we most need, today, are the right kinds of people, the right kinds of leaders, involved in the political and cultural spheres. Leadership matters – but we need the right kind of leaders. The times demand that a new kind (or rather, a return to an old kind) of leader be trained “for such a time as this.”

Williams Baptist University – A Campus of *Christian Purpose*

Our founder, Dr. H. E. Williams, often referred to WBU as “A Campus of Christian Purpose.” Notice his emphasis upon the word “purpose.” We exist for a purpose – a Christian purpose. Our history reveals that this purpose is to make disciples – to train leaders – to change our world.

This is our purpose – I believe that God has prepared and equipped all of us to build a university with a Christ-centered worldview – faithfully grounded on the Bible and unashamedly focused upon the gospel. Our purpose is to train, equip, and mobilize each student to be a Christ-centered, transformative leader – to equip leaders committed to Christ and to His gospel who will go and change the world.

I believe that God raised up Williams Baptist University “for such a time as this,” to fulfill this purpose, and I believe the importance, relevance, and need for this purpose is as great as it has ever been. Our purpose is to impact the world with the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ by equipping, educating, and training gospel-minded leaders for service in all facets of human existence.

We are the generation that God has prepared for this time, and the purpose of Williams Baptist University is a significant way God’s people can do something about the way things are. The mission of Williams is a way the church of Jesus Christ can come together to educate and equip a generation of Christian leaders with a biblical backbone and gospel conviction, to do what is right, to stand for what is right, regardless of the social, political, or economic challenges that confront us.

Summary & Challenge

Leaders come from unexpected people in unexpected ways. Most of us, if not all of us, are the unexpected people from unexpected places doing unexpected things. Each of us has a calling to be this kind of leader. I believe God is calling you – faculty, coaches, administrators, staff – to this purpose – to equip and mobilize our students to be a Williams Way kind of leader. I believe God is calling you – students – to this purpose – commit to be a Williams Way kind of leader.

The times demand Christian leaders. We need Williams Way kind of leaders – “for such a time as this!” The need for Williams Way kinds of leaders is as great as it has ever been. The world needs you to fulfill your purpose – our world needs you to embrace this purpose – now. This is the time for all of us to rise up and embrace this calling, this purpose – to be Williams Way kind of leaders.

Stay on the wall – focus on your purpose – overcome distractions. We must be ready to engage and overcome the challenges and obstacles that distract us from our purpose. We must echo the cry of Nehemiah, “I am doing important work and cannot come down. Why should the work cease while I leave it and go down to you?” We must stay the course and resist the temptations that threaten to distract us from our work. Stay focused on your purpose!

Commit to the Williams Way – train to be a transformative leader. This is our time, this is our calling, this is our purpose. I am ready to be a Williams Way kind of leader – how about you?! Will join me in this noble calling? Be a Williams Way leader!