



**“Why Are the Humanities Essential for a Biblical Worldview?  
The Human Centrality of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ?  
Fall 2020 Convocation Address  
North Greenville University  
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We have been working on some changes for a while related to our so-called “formal chapels.” In the past, we have had a special chapel called “Founders Day” in mid-September that included an outside speaker. Beginning this year, we are going to launch a Founders Day emphasis on campus that will include a special event each year recognizing a past event or a person who has made a significant impact in the history of the university. Instead of the Founders Day chapel, we are today moving to join the practice of most Christian universities in having a Convocation Chapel to open the academic year. The word “convocation” means “to call together” and the idea is that the entire campus community is called together to a single service to hear a message from the president or another campus leader, a call or a challenge for the year that hopefully adds some sort of insight to our shared work of intellectual discipleship.

Because of COVID, we have made this year’s chapel a little less formal. While I am gowned up, as I will be in future years, we do not have our faculty gowned up today. We have not had a formal processional. This year’s ceremony is devoid of the pomp and circumstance usually assigned to this kind of event, but the essence of convocation is not the ceremony, it is the message.

I have been praying all summer about my opening message to the community and have landed on this one: “Why Are the Humanities Essential for a Biblical Worldview?” I hope you will find this helpful, whether you are a faculty member, a student in-person, a student watching via video, or a community member downloading this later on.

As we begin, **please rise out of respect for God’s Word as I read for you 1 Corinthians 15.**

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<sup>1</sup> Gene C. Fant, Jr., Ph.D., is the eighth president of North Greenville University, serving since 2017. He is a widely published author and commentator, speaking frequently at churches, colleges, and in other settings. Some of the remarks in this address are updates of parts of his book, *The Liberal Arts: A Student’s Guide* (Crossway 2012), a widely used textbook in honors and college orientation courses, addressing the philosophical and theological foundations of education at Christian institutions.

## So, “Why Are the Humanities Essential for a Biblical Worldview?”

First, let me position a **brief definition of the humanities**. At North Greenville, our largest academic unit is the College of Humanities and Sciences, led by Dean Paul Thompson. The sciences are the areas that employ mathematical and scientific tools to describe and understand the world and the humanities are the fields that explore the human experience. While at NGU, we have the departments of English, history, and languages in the School of Humanities, an argument could be made that the humanities include all uniquely human undertakings like art, music, theater, communications studies, education, business and entrepreneurship, healthcare, psychology, political science, criminal justice, outdoor leadership and even the queen of the sciences, theology and Christian studies. The humanities are thus directly related to our species, *homo sapiens*, the “thinking man,” and our shared experiences as unique residents of this planet.

I should add as well that the reason the Humanities and the Sciences are rightly joined in a place like NGU is that **the sciences have an incredible ability to figure out what is possible**. Can we build a bridge across the Mississippi River? Can we send a rocket to Mars? Can we develop a vaccine for COVID? **But the sciences are unable to tell us what is right and wrong without the insights afforded by the humanities**. We have the ability to design incredibly powerful land mines, for example; we have that ability. But **should** we design them and utilize them? We can design immensely powerful gas oven to exterminate entire groups of people but the humanities—particularly when rooted in a Christian understanding of anthropology—are where we discern that this is horrific and an affront to God Himself. Science tells us what we **can** do. The humanities tell us what we **MAY** do or even what we **MUST** do. In a biblical worldview, they are of a necessity twin sides of the same academic coin.

In addition to serving as the eighth president of North Greenville, I hold the title of Professor of English. While I don’t get to teach at NGU currently, I earned academic tenure at two previous institutions, Mississippi College and Union University, and I achieved the rank of Full Professor while at Union, holding that rank at Palm Beach Atlantic University as well as, now, NGU. Over the years, I have taught courses in a variety of disciplines because of my really weird background. But my love is for literature, and it’s been my primary framework for academics for over 30 years now.

**I love literature because I love stories**. I am amazed by the power of storytelling and how it connects us. When I get together with friends from my young adulthood, we share the stories of our youth. When I am at family gatherings, we tell stories. Over the COVID spring and summer, we have all consumed stories in the form of Netflix and Amazon. But it’s larger than even that.

**One of my favorite classes to teach is world literature**. In that course, we make the rounds through the poetry, drama, and prose of the world’s different eras and cultures. The incredible journey of Gilgamesh and his deep friendship with Enkidu. The Love Poetry of Ancient Egypt, Catullus, the early Chinese classics, Petrarch, and Lady Mary Wroth. The challenges of *the Iliad* and *the Odyssey*. The irony of *Oedipus Rex*. Chaucer’s fascinating personality profiles and psychological insights. The marriage of Prince Rama and long-suffering Sita in India’s *Ramayana*. The cosmological musing of the Popol Vuh. The powerful expose’ of power in Nigerian author Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. The pathos of martyrdom in Shusaku Endo’s *Silence*. The haunted landscape of American author Toni Morrison. The

gloriously shimmering and fragile fabric of my favorite fiction writer, F. Scott Fitzgerald, who wrote many of his stories within thirty miles of Tigerville, South Carolina.

Every country, every culture, every era has had storytellers who have not only told their stories but have shaped their cultures and subsequent ones. Without Sir Walter Scott and Gustave Flaubert, you don't get William Faulkner. Without William Faulkner, you don't get Toni Morrison. Without Toni Morrison, you don't get the current generation of writers whom she influenced.

What never ceases to amaze me is how I can read a story from Nigeria and learn something about myself through it, even though I am distanced from it by culture, geography, and time. I can read a love poem from sixth century China and recognize my own emotions. Indeed, this self-recognition in the words of others is something I often observe about most people's story-listening impulse: we all want to hear the story about someone very interesting, fascinating, and unique, someone just like me.

Because of this, **I have long defined literature as the "written expression of shared human experience."** I use this definition in my book on Christian literary theory, *God as Author*, which explores the theological overtones of stories. And what I mean is that ***stories connect us in a way that nothing else does.***

Shakespeare is the best-known writer of the seventeenth century in England, perhaps the most important period of literary production in that country and language. Two other figures towered over the era as well, Sir Edmund Spenser on one end of the period, whose *Faerie Queene* was the most influential work of the Elizabethan period but who is rarely read by non-specialists now, and John Milton, the author of *Paradise Lost*, a book often cited as the last work of the entire Renaissance, at least in England.

**Milton was an incredible intellect.** He was, perhaps, the last person to have read everything ever published in his native language. His facility with languages was extraordinary. He had fluency in English, French, Dutch, Italian, Spanish, Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Syriac. **In his quiet time, he prayed in Hebrew so that God would not have to bother to translate.**

**Languages were an important part of Milton's theology,** as he believed that much of the problems of humanity were rooted in the fall of languages as described in Genesis 11, when the Tower of Babel proved to be the root source of much conflict and division, essentially fracturing humankind, distributing the population around the settled world, and generating hatred between the newly arisen subdivisions. And his study of languages was an attempt to create a path to understanding history and humankind from a new perspective.

**In 1644, Milton published his philosophy of education in a pamphlet now known as "Of Education," which includes this very short explanation of the purpose of an education:**

**"The end [ or purpose] then of learning is to repair the ruins of our first parents by regaining to know God aright, and out of that knowledge, to love him, to imitate him, to be like him, as we may the nearest by possessing our souls of true virtue, which being united to the heavenly grace of faith make up the highest perfection."**

So let me distill that short statement into an even shorter statement: the purpose of education—and NGU attempts this kind of an education—is the repair of the ruin and chaos brought into this world by our first parents, Adam and Eve.

First, what is the ruin that needs repair? At least three effects of this ruin may be noted: 1 Sin & Death, 2 Egocentrism, 3, Division.

There is a passage that concludes Romans 1 pretty much parses these things out into a list:

*<sup>28</sup> And because they did not think it worthwhile to acknowledge God, God delivered them over to a corrupt mind so that they do what is not right. <sup>29</sup> They are filled with all unrighteousness,<sup>[L]</sup> evil, greed, and wickedness. They are full of envy, murder, quarrels, deceit, and malice. They are gossips, <sup>30</sup> slanderers, God-haters, arrogant, proud, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, <sup>31</sup> senseless, untrustworthy, unloving,<sup>[S]</sup> and unmerciful. <sup>32</sup> Although they know God's just sentence—that those who practice such things deserve to die<sup>[L]</sup>—they not only do them, but even applaud<sup>[U]</sup> others who practice them.*

All of the items on this list are rooted in sin, egocentrism, and division. All of them are characteristics of a culture that has forgotten God and the things of God, particularly truth, and have pursued an agenda of death. Milton believed that a Christ-first, humanities-based education could combat these things.

The humanities are filled with incredibly examples of history, literature, psychology, music, art, drama, and other means of helping us to think about the experiences we all share: Love. Breakups. Death. Loss. Fear. Laughter. Triumph. Tragedy. Backstabbing. Conflict with Nature. Conflict with each other.

One of the joys of being in your twenties that will escape you now but will encourage you in the future is that you are not the only person who has ever experienced what you may be experiencing or who has asked the questions that you may be asking. Whatever may be new to you is hardly new on the scale of humanity and human experience. What is God's will for my life? Why am I a failure? Why can't I seem to get beyond what is in front of me? Why is love so painful or elusive? Why are politics so incredibly disillusioning?

**The classic, Christ-centered humanities make bold assertion: as humans we are all brothers and sisters, descendants of a first mother and a first father, a species and an extended family that is connected together by blood and by the image of God Himself, imprinted at the time of Creation.**

While we may be divided up into nations, tribes, tongues, and parties, they are subdivisions with a common frame. Indeed, in the biblical worldview perspective, not only are our stories things that unite us and transcend these subdivisions, but **even our bodies themselves unite us and underscore our shared nature.** It was no coincidence that medical science advanced into areas like blood transfusion and organ transplantation in a Christian context, where the belief was that because humans bore the image of God, our bodies shared common physiology. **Emil Kocher, for example, the first surgeon to complete a successful organ transplant was deeply driven by his Christian faith.** If our blood is the same, we are the same; if our organs are the same, we are the same. If our pain, our love, our suffering, our joys, our longings are the same, we are the same.

**Milton's declaration says that education can repair the ruin of humanity because it ultimately gives hope!** We can be repaired! We can find ways to understand this world! We can read about what the greatest minds who have gone before us and learn their perspectives. We can even learn from their methods of dealing with the relentless emotional drain of living in a fallen world. Education, for Milton and for Gene Fant I might add, is a perpetually optimistic activity in that it points to the ultimate answer to the alienation of this world! Christ Jesus! Hope is something that is uniquely human.

And that leads me to something else that is uniquely human: **Of all the species on the planet, we alone have the opportunity to have a saving relationship with God.**

**Indeed, humans alone have the hope of the resurrection,** which brings me back to 1 Corinthians 15, the passage I read earlier. We are blood-bound as a people in pain, in love, in suffering, in joys, in our longings that are held commonly. We also are a little lower than the angels, as Psalm 8:5 says, but in a unique role on earth, as bearers of God's image. And because we have the opportunity to have a relationship with God, we have the opportunity to enjoy Him forever. And part of that is the hope of the resurrection.

The passage I read a moment ago is a crucial text to understanding Christianity as a distinctive religion. In the opening verses, Paul uses a version of the scientific method to assert the reality of the literal resurrection of Christ. Notice how he analyzes it in verses four through eight: first the resurrected Christ appeared to Cephas—Simon Peter—and then he was seen by the rest of the Twelve, which included Thomas the Doubter, who physically touched the wounds in Christ's body, then to over five hundred witnesses, which he asserts are a body of ongoing witnesses that the physical resurrection of Christ actually happened. It was not a hallucination. It was not a delusion. Then he asserts, in verse seven, that he himself, Paul in a vision, also saw the resurrected Lord.

Paul then interrupts his analysis in verses nine through eleven, **admitting that his efforts to be perfect were all in vain. That he constantly failed in these pursuits and has realized that the grace of God is what has changed him.** His only hope was the resurrection. His own efforts to perfect himself had failed miserably and had offered only a heavy burden that had dragged his life down.

He returns to his analysis in verse twelve. I'll not go back to this but please do so in your own time and reflect on the core concepts that are there, that Christ's resurrection is the central and culminating act of Christ's sacrificial death on the cross, that many good men have died but they have stayed dead. **Only the One Perfect Man has died AND been resurrected from the dead.**

So we arrive at verses 21 and 22, which are the anchors of our time today:

*"For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead also comes through a man.*

*For just as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive."*

**Death is the experience most common to all men and women. It is the great leveler. It is the ultimate reality check. But through Christ, death has been defeated as we have no need to fear death's transition into the afterlife!**

Just as humans have uniqueness, Christianity likewise has uniqueness. In all other religious systems, our hope for salvation, for eternal life, for a preserved name, or other achievements lie **within ourselves**. It is an enlightened person who ascends above others. It is a suffering exemplar who teaches us how to suffer ourselves so that we may attain a higher state. It is the journey of discovery that carries us to the next level of self-awareness. **As we analyze these systems, we discover an interesting fact: the goal is the separation between us as individuals and the rest of humanity:** we are becoming what others are not as we seek eternal self-actualization. If you follow this logic, **secular humility thus becomes a self-evident marker of superiority to others**. We see evidence of this all around us, as we see worldviews that impose divisions **based on so-called epiphanies or enlightenment**. In *Gilgamesh*, Utnapishtim is not like everyone else because of the success of his journeys. In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus is not like everyone else. In the *Ramayana*, Rama is not like everyone else. In Maugham's *The Razor's Edge*, Larry Darrell is not like everyone else. I could go on and on. In culture after culture, in philosophy after philosophy, in religion after religion, a hierarchy among persons develops that elevates some, denigrates others, and appeals to the human weakness of egocentrism and division.

**But the Christian understanding is completely different.**

Look at verses 47-49:

*The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. Like the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; like the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. And just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven.*

Check out the emphasis here. The contrast between Adam of the earth and Christ of heaven. The right word is indeed contrast. Christ is different. Christ makes a difference! We are children of Adam; we are children of the earth.

**Three cups of forgiveness.**

Define "feculent." Look how much less feculent I am than they are! I am proud of my lack of sewerage!

But the reality is that I would not drink of the middle cup any more than I would drink the first. Only pure water is pure water. And this is the message of 1 Corinthians 15! We are made perfect only by the PERFECT One! Listen to the words of Romans 3:5 and following:

*If our unrighteousness highlights God's righteousness, what are we to say? I am not using a human argument: . . . There is no one righteous, not even one. There is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away; all alike have become worthless. There is no one who does what is good, not even one. Their throat is an open grave; they deceive with their tongues. Vipers' venom is under their lips. Their mouth is full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and wretchedness are in their paths, and the path of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes. . . . The righteousness of God has been revealed, attested by the Law and the Prophets. The righteousness of God is through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe, since there is no*

*distinction. For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. They are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. God presented him as an atoning sacrifice in his blood, received through faith, to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his restraint God passed over the sins previously committed. God presented him to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so that he would be righteous and declare righteous the one who has faith in Jesus.*

**The humanities underscore the reality that as humans, we are brothers and sisters. We have shared humanity, shared experiences, and the ubiquitous commonality of death.** Christianity asserts that we are the common heirs of common parents, our first mother and our first father. The stories we tell, the histories we learn, the languages we master, the subjects we consider all combine to educate us in how to repair the ruin of our first parents. They remind us about what we have in common: our shared humanity.

And look! Even death has been defeated! Listen to the end of the chapter, starting with verse 51:

*<sup>51</sup> Listen, I am telling you a mystery: We will not all fall asleep, but we will all be changed, <sup>52</sup> in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we will be changed. <sup>53</sup> For this corruptible body must be clothed with incorruptibility, and this mortal body must be clothed with immortality. <sup>54</sup> When this corruptible body is clothed with incorruptibility, and this mortal body is clothed with immortality, then the saying that is written will take place: **Death has been swallowed up in victory.**<sup>[1]</sup>*

*<sup>55</sup> **Where, death, is your victory?***

***Where, death, is your sting?**<sup>[k]</sup>*

*<sup>56</sup> The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. <sup>57</sup> But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ! <sup>58</sup> Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the Lord's work, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.*

Here is a miracle and a mystery: our shared humanity places us squarely in a relationship with God and Christ Jesus. For we learn in Revelation 7:9 that in the end,

*"a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belong to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"*

Indeed, God has exalted Christ

*"to the highest place and gave Him the name above all names, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess, that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (Phil 2:9-11)*

**While education can repair the ruin of our first parents, it cannot erase the eternal effects of the ruin of those first parents.** Only Jesus Christ, the second Adam to the first Adam, can do that. Because He

was and IS the perfect Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity, the Son of Heaven Who loved each of us so much that He came to rescue us by becoming like us, fully God yet Fully Man, the God Man who has relieved us of the burden of our own sins and our own pitiful efforts to be perfect. His righteousness becomes our righteousness. His life becomes our life, as we repent of our sins and submit to His Lordship over our lives.

**My life's verse is 1 John 4:19: "*We love because He first loved us.*" NGU community, He has loved us! Let us love as He has loved us!**

**Prayer:** God, it is not enough that we know these things. Give us the wisdom and the opportunity live out our shared humanity by sharing Your offer of reconciliation and being agents of biblical justice and biblical reconciliation among all of Creation. May it be so in this academic year, 2020-2021, and beyond. Blessings.