

Second Glance

Nurturing the Seeds of Ministry

BY RICK ATCHLEY



Rick Atchley is one of 12 recipients of a Distinguished Alumni Citation from ACU in 2006. A 1978 graduate, he is senior minister of the Richland Hills Church of Christ in North Richland Hills, Texas. He made the following comments when he received his award Nov. 30.

This alumni award has caused me to reflect upon the crux of my ministry and the direction in which I want to aim the rest of my life.

ACU's blessing to me didn't end when I graduated. Abilene Christian helps me be a better preacher through experiencing its Bible Lectureship and through relationships with professors and insight from the books they have authored.

I have concluded that there are five themes in my ministry – big thoughts – and the seeds for them were planted through my relationship to the university.

First, the gospel of Christ is bigger than all other doctrines. I didn't know that when I first enrolled at ACU. I used to think that all biblical interpretations were equal in importance and in relation to salvation. My view was quickly challenged by the diversity of views I encountered in my fellow students. For example, my youth group never had events where we swam together, but I met students from California and Florida who went on retreats to the beach, and that's when I learned that a church's stance on mixed swimming was directly proportional to how close that church was to a body of water. This caused me great perplexity until I began to attend my classes and ACU taught me to think theologically. It also helped to read my Bible.

Jesus was asked one time, "What is the most important law?" and he didn't say, "Well, they're all equal." He answered the question in Mark 12: "'The most important one,' answered Jesus, 'is this: Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these.'"

And what I finally began to understand – and it took me quite a while – was that my brother and I are not going to agree on everything. We are going to be wrong on some things, but he's my brother if he's right on Jesus. And I have decided that the emphasis a subject deserves in my sermons is based on its proximity to the cross. The closer it is to the cross, the more I must talk about it. The gospel of Christ is bigger than all other doctrines.

Second, the grace of God is bigger than any sin or mistake. Today's ACU students hear preaching from guys such as Phil Ware, Eddie Sharp and Mike Cope every Sunday. For me, it was Lynn Anderson. I still remember going to the Highland Church of Christ as a freshman, when Lynn was preaching through the gospel of John. My soul exploded with joy when it realized my salvation didn't depend on my moral or doctrinal perfection, but on my faith in the perfect Son of God. Before I knew that, I would have had no good news for the woman who was married five times. I would have preached **almost** good news, but now I am convinced that, when I stand here every Sunday, I preach to nobody whose mess is bigger than God's grace. The grace of God is bigger than any sin or mistake.

Third, the power of God is bigger than our limits. At ACU I began to see my God was too small. That began in an Old Testament class with Dr. John Willis walking us through Genesis and Exodus, studying the great miracles of God. Dr. Willis didn't teach us what God did; he taught us what God does and who He is, not who He used to be. He opened the New Testament in an Old Testament class and taught us about the Holy Spirit. I came to believe in a God who, in the presence

of His Spirit, actually lives in me. I came to believe in a God who really does answer prayer, who can set anyone free from anything and who still does the impossible. I used to think that God just expected me to show up, but now I expect God to show up, and that is a big difference.

Fourth, I learned that the mission of God is bigger than church tradition or politics. ACU planted in my mind a view of the church that Jesus came to build that was global in impact. I remember hearing Dr. Wendell Broom and later, Dr. Dan Coker, who began to teach me about the church around the world. I knew they were missionaries because their shirts didn't tuck in. They helped me see that the church should be viewed missionally and not denominationally. Some think our goal is to make sure the church doesn't change. I believe the goal is to make sure the church is changing the world. I am so excited because more and more people understand that in our fellowship. I really do believe our best days are ahead.

Then finally, at ACU, I began to understand that the kingdom of God is bigger than we realize. My junior year I took a class in restoration history with Dr. Bill Humble. We studied some of the great documents the early leaders in Churches of Christ wrote, and I was stunned at what I read. Humble taught us that we are Christians only, not the only Christians. Through his class, through conversations with students, and through my travels around the world, I began to see God and His reign in places where I had never looked before. In Mark 9: "Teacher," said John, "we saw a man driving out demons in your name, and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us." "Do not stop him," Jesus said. "No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us. I tell you the truth, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward." It took me a while, but I finally understood that just because someone is not "one of us" doesn't mean they are not one of Christ's. It will never again be my agenda to oppose anybody who is doing good in the name of Jesus. Service is at the heart of the gospel.

I recently spent three days in Louisiana at Camp Algiers, helping minister to people who lost their homes in the last year's hurricanes. People from all over the nation have come to our camp to serve as relief workers from Churches of Christ, Christian churches, community churches, and Bible churches. Such earthly distinctions don't mean much to people in need. What's important to people in New Orleans is that the people who love Jesus are loving on them; they are listening to the gospel because people are doing good in His name.

I have a passion to see the dream that began the Restoration movement become a fire again: that we all rally around the cross and just become Christians for Jesus. I particularly am eager to see the rift between Churches of Christ and Christian churches get confessed and healed. I am so proud of ACU that in its own 100th year it is taking a leading role in helping end a 100-year-old division.

I return to campus once or twice a year, visits that inevitably cause me to reflect upon my ACU roots. Regardless of where I wander, it is not unusual to run into Dr. Neil Lightfoot. I took just one class from him, the Gospel of John, one of the best I ever had. I wasn't one of his major students, so I don't know why he always shows such kindness to me. But he never fails to smile warmly and ask simply, "Rick, are you still preaching the Word?"

I tell him I am, and that I will until I get to heaven and God gives me something bigger to do. I am undeserving but grateful, a blessed man longing to tell others what He has helped me find. ▲