Taylor: Reflections on lives well lived (August 2000)

Taylor University
Capturing the Keslers
Of wit and wisdom

When Jay is speaking, the chapel is guaranteed to be packed beyond capacity, with students and staff taking a spot on the floor when seats run out. This was true for Jay's last chapel speech as president. His speech was the epitome of Kesler wit and wisdom, framing the serious matters of life in laughable words and giving us a glimpse into his heart as he prepared to retire from the presidency.

"As a little kid," he told the audience members, "I was always the kind of person who thought 'my sisters will have their birthday, but I won't have mine because something will happen.' Yet, here I am 64, almost 65, and I've never missed a birthday. ... Janie and I have been thinking about retirement and this kind of thing, and I think both of us thought, 'We'll get gypped. I'll up and go toes
up just before we get to gyp the social security people.' And now it doesn't look like that's going to happen. I think I will frame that first social security check."

Jay has officially made it to retirement from the presidency without going "toes up," and now many members of the Taylor community, still laughing from Jay's quips, are rushing to offer tribute to the Keslers. There have been day-long celebrations, specially produced videos and CDs and an endless stream of well-wishes. This special edition of Taylor's magazine is yet another attempt to offer our thanks while we also recount our fondest memories and the highlights of the Keslers' reign at Taylor.

1) Jay lends his support to students helping move books to the new Zondervan library in 1986. 2) Janie and Jay in Upland's Labor Day Parade. 3) Jay's years at YFC made him an authoritative professor for a youth missions course. 4) Students and staff alike stood in honor of Jay at his final chapel as president. 5) Tony Campolo with Jay. 6) Chuck Colson with Jay. 7) Janie enjoying some recreation on campus with grandson Luke Collins. 8) Janie, Jay and Betty Freese at the annual senior creaming. 9) A balloon launch marked the celebration of the merger between Summit Christian College and Taylor. 10) Jay and sculptor Ken Ryden examine models of the Samuel Morris statues.
That casket has long gone unused, and instead, Jay has spent the last 15 years breathing new life into a university that was struggling for air when he assumed the presidency. Today, the University is in better financial shape than ever before, with higher enrollments, a second campus, an academically stronger student body and an unwavering commitment to the mission of educating men and women for service in the kingdom. Jay would be the first to attribute these accomplishments to the hands of God and the hard work of many individuals. Most of those individuals would jump to attribute Taylor’s growth to the hands of God and the heart of her leader.

Assuming the position at Taylor was the only career change Jay ever had, he spent 30 years working with high school students at Youth for Christ, including 12 years as president. Always an evangelist, he often spent more nights on the road than he did at home, and simultaneously held a preaching pastorate at an Illinois church while serving with YFC. This small-town Indiana boy quickly rose to the forefront of evangelicalism, with no semblance of self-promotion.

Jay, a 1958 Taylor grad, quickly earned first place in the hearts of the student body and faculty, who were able to see that underneath his occasionally unpolished surface lay a truly first-rate mind and an even more committed heart. Four decades in the public’s eye have not smoothed the rough spots that make Jay’s personality and character so appealing to the constituency he serves. As Dan Bubar ‘01 said at the May 13 celebration marking Jay’s retirement from the presidency, “We like your moxie, your passion for life. We think maybe there’s a 21-year-old locked inside you still. You’re still a little rough around the edges, a little salty.”

Bubar’s comments are especially appropriate for this salt-of-the-earth leader who stands humbly at the apex of evangelicalism. From his early days as a student leader and evangelist to his later years as an author and the president of one of the nation’s most esteemed Christian colleges, Jay has held firm to his faith and his commitments. And holding firm to his hand has always been his wife Janie, a quiet leader and constant example among those she encounters.

MORNING KINDERGARTEN

Spend a few minutes watching Jay and Janie Kesler, and you won’t have to look too hard to see that after 43 years of marriage, there is still a noticeable spark in their relationship. Jay has been quoted as saying she gets more beautiful as years go by, and not many onlookers could disagree. Somehow he seems more grounded when she’s at his side, and he credits her faithful support and caretaking.
as a primary sustaining force throughout his ministry.

Born and raised during their early years in the same town, Jay and Janie could say it was the South Bend public school system that prevented their romance from starting at a much younger age. They were students in the same grade level from the onset, but Jay was enrolled in morning kindergarten and Janie went in the afternoon. Had either been in the other’s class, the Keslers’ romance may have gotten a much earlier start. Instead, they never knew each other. Later in grade school, Jay’s family moved to the country and Janie’s moved to Mishawaka, Ind.

The youngest of four children, Janie spent much of her childhood and early adult years caring for her sister Elaine, whose disability prevented her from walking. Elaine died in 1985. Even now, Janie fondly remembers her sister and counts her as her best friend.

Through high school Janie was active with YFC and used her musical talent to sing with a trio called the Joy Bells. Jay first saw Janie when she was singing at a YFC event. They later met through mutual friends.

While Janie was raised in a Christian home, Jay’s parents did not know the Lord. (Both accepted Christ in their later years.) As a young believer, Jay felt a burning desire to enter the ministry. His parents discouraged this, and he instead attended Ball State University, where his leadership skills developed as he served as freshman class president. After two years at BSU, the call to ministry became too loud to ignore, and Kesler moved 30 minutes up the road to Upland, where he enrolled as a junior the same year Janie Smith enrolled as a freshman.

In the early stages of their friendship, Jay told Janie their relationship was purely platonic – a word Janie still remembers looking up in the dictionary. After their paths met again at Taylor, however, the relationship was quickly redefined as something more. More than 40 years later, Jay often entertains students in chapel with stories from his courtship, including tales of stolen kisses in the front seat of his car. “We always put the Word of God between us,” Jay jokes, “but more often than not it ended up on the dashboard.”

The Keslers married on June 7, 1957, and Jay completed his second senior year at Taylor while Janie worked at a local bank. Always a leader, Jay was a class president and an active evangelist with local chapters of YFC. Janie played the trumpet with Taylor’s band. Following his graduation, Jay and Janie lived in the Swallow-Robin Residence Hall for a year as Jay served as the resident director.

CAME TO PREACH

Jay had been active on a part-time basis with YFC for several years when friends began to encourage him toward full-time ministry. Family friend Jack Daniel recruited him for YFC and, he says, “I succeeded beyond my wildest dreams, God definitely had his hand in this.”

A natural preacher, by the age of 24, Jay was called upon to lead week-long revivals targeting youth and adults. It was at one of these revivals that Jay met Paul Robbins, a 1960 graduate of Summit Christian College (now Taylor Fort Wayne) and current chair of the Taylor Board of Trustees. Jay had been asked to speak at an evangelistic crusade in Bluffton, Ind., and Robbins, who was in charge of music for the Fort Wayne YFC, was asked to arrange the music. That was the beginning of a life-long working partnership and friendship that has moved through upper levels of YFC administration to the highest ranking offices at Taylor University.

Even in those early days, Robbins was able to identify something unique in Jay’s character that suited him for outreach to students. “I grew up in a ministry family and by the time I first heard Jay I had heard a lot of preachers,” Robbins recalls. “But when I heard Jay explain the Scriptures and relate them to everyday life, I found them fresh and stimulating; it was something I wanted to ponder. I knew this was a young man who had a very special preaching gift.”

That special gift, which Jay identified as a calling early in his life, led him around the world as he spoke at churches, crusades, revivals and youth conferences. His work with YFC in Indiana led to a position at the national headquarters, then in Wheaton, Ill. Both Jay and Robbins moved up the ranks of YFC leadership: Kesler working in domestic ministry; Robbins working with YFC’s international outreaches.

A classic over-achiever, as his children call him, Jay balanced his work...
at YFC with a preaching pastorate at the First Baptist Church in Geneva, Ill., a position he began in 1970 and continued until the Keslers moved to Indiana. Janie was also an active member at the church, serving as a surrogate daughter to the men and women in the seniors ministry. The involvement in the church gave the family some stability, bringing Jay home every weekend for his preaching role on Sunday morning.

**AIRPLANE FUEL AND EXCITEMENT**

During those years in Illinois, the Keslers raised three children, Laurie, Bruce and Terri, while the Robbins raised two sons. Work often carried Jay far from home, averaging over 250 nights away from home each year in his early days of ministry.

Robbins recalls frequent trips to O'Hare Airport in Chicago to pick one another up. "Our wives were kind of travel widows," he says. "They were raising young children and trying to make sure our clothes were ready for the next suitcase so we could grab our bags and run."

Jay lists among his few regrets that he wasn't present at the birth of any of his children. "I was so busy trying to be the Holy Spirit rather than follow him," he reflects.

Janie and Robbins' wife Mary were left to manage the homes. "I think Jay and I feel that while we have very good relationships with our kids, their mothers were the dominant influence in their lives as young children," Robbins says. It was Janie and Mary's commitment to the ministry that kept them going through the many nights alone with the children. "They saw keeping things together at home as their contribution to the kingdom," Robbins says.

"I give a lot of credit to Mom, who didn't make us feel like God was taking Dad away."

Following in the footsteps of YFC's first evangelist, Billy Graham, Jay used his lay-person approach to ministry to open doors in denominational and para-church settings alike. Robbins believes one of Jay's greatest contributions to YFC may be the connections he developed between organizations like YFC and Inter-Varsity, churches, and Christian universities. "He strengthened the bond between those four groups and helped us understand the necessity of linking arms with sister Christian organizations to help young people from their junior high years right up through their university years and into adulthood," Robbins says.

Moving from YFC, an organization which works primarily with high school students, to Taylor was a natural next step for Jay, says Robbins. "It was the logical extension of how he had already invested his life."

Jay was asked to become the 28th president on the day of Terri's graduation. His election to the presidency at Taylor may have come as a surprise for some. With no earned academic degrees beyond his 1958 bachelor's from Taylor, his resume was much better suited for an evangelist and non-profit leader than an academian. He was, as he called himself in his inaugural speech, a "high mileage clergyman youthworker."

What made Jay a viable candidate for the presidency? His intellectual gifts and Christian commitment, along with his tremendous ability to communicate. "He has one of the most inquisitive minds many of us have ever encountered," Robbins says. "What is unusual is that his very inquisitive mind is harnessed to a very articulate tongue, a dynamic combination."

Jay has been called one of the last great generalists, able to speak intelligently about almost any subject put before him. This ability has been fostered through his voracious appetite for reading; he often devours several books in a single week.
Faculty members have noted that Jay always seems to know the developing issues and current research in their fields. He has an uncanny ability to retain knowledge and apply that knowledge in surprisingly relevant ways. Though his vita lacks an earned doctorate, few would dispute the soundness of his intellect.

**FIVE SMOOTH STONES**

Jay assumed Taylor’s presidency in 1985 and was inaugurated in 1986. He addressed concerns over his lack of degrees in his inaugural address, titled, “Five Smooth Stones.”

“Like David of old,” he said, “I cannot wear another man’s armor. Experience in education and academic preparation should, in most cases, be the prerequisites for such a task. There is no sensitivity or reluctance to acknowledge this forthrightly. Lacking these, I reach into the streambed of experience to share with you the guiding principles that serve as my ‘five smooth stones’ for the challenge ahead.”

Those guiding principles — confidence in God, commitment to Christ, support of the liberal arts, encouragement of the faculty and belief in the human need for relationships — have served him well; but like David who only needed one stone to kill Goliath, Jay’s commitment to Christ probably would have been enough to win the adoration of the student body.

“We swelled with pride to call you our president,” said Karen Muselman Thomas ’87, who was a sophomore when Jay came to campus. At the May 13 celebration Thomas recalled an early talk Jay gave in campus, where he challenged students to begin their days with a time of devotion, and asked them to hold him accountable to doing the same. Not long after, a student met Jay while he waited for an early morning flight at O’Hare Airport. The student asked if Jay had spent time with God yet that morning and Jay admitted he hadn’t. He later confessed to the entire student body.

“He impressed and humbled us with his integrity and honesty,” said Thomas. Fourteen other graduating classes of students would agree.

Even more than being spiritual role models, Jay and Janie have provided more than 5,000 students with an example of marriage partnership built on faith in God, trust in each other and lots of laughter. “What other president do you see riding a tandem bike all over campus with his wife, or wearing pajamas at a Christmas party?” asked James Kunnah 00.

The Keslers’ playful attitude has served them well among their students, who take great pride in calling the president and first lady by their first names. But Jay and Janie don’t sacrifice serious concerns for humor. Both have worked closely with students to mentor and disciple. Together they’ve met with couples preparing for marriage, and Jay has presided over countless wedding ceremonies. Janie is a faithful supporter of Taylor women, serving as the honorary chairperson of the Women’s Seminar committee and sponsoring a tea for graduating seniors. Their home has long been a site of planned and unplanned visits from groups of students seeking bits of wisdom from their favorite sage.

Jay is not the only one who has compared himself to David. Taylor’s provost, Dr. Daryl Yost, also the executive vice president of the Taylor campus, often says their relationship is like that of David and Jonathan. Yost has taken responsibility for much of the day to day business of the University while Jay has built the school’s reputation and endowment. “They complement each other because they’re interested in different aspects of administration,” says Yost’s wife, Joenita.

“When the books are written about the Kesler era at Taylor,” Jay says, “Daryl deserves at least half the credit.” Jay calls his Jonathan a “steel covered marshmallow,” portraying a gruff exterior but possessing a tender heart.

With Daryl at his side, Jay conquered many of the giants that were threatening Taylor’s stability in the mid-80s. Dr. Steve Bedi, Taylor’s associate vice president of academic affairs, recalled Jethro’s advice to Moses in Exodus 18. “This thing is too heavy for you,” Jethro said, advising that Moses seek the assistance of qualified helpers. Jay took the same path. “You’d rather put 1,000 men to work than do the work of 1,000 men,” said Bedi. This approach brought results.

In Jay’s 15 years at Taylor, the
University has seen the creation of a strategic plan, a more stable fiscal environment and a dramatic improvement in enrollment. The University has added a second campus in Fort Wayne and is actively developing distance learning opportunities for non-traditional students. The endowment has gone from $5.7 million to $35 million; one capital campaign has been completed and another stands at nearly $60 million, just $15 million short of its goal. In 1985 enrollment on the Upland campus stood at 1460; today, the campus is home to 1891 students, with retention rates of between 94 and 96 percent and a waiting list of others who want to study in Upland. Students are more academically competitive as well. Only 85 students were on the Dean’s List in 1985; today, each semester sees over 600 students earn GPAs of 3.60 or higher.

Less easy to quantify but even more significant than an increasing endowment or enrollment is the University’s spiritual status. Bedi, in a report to the Taylor faculty, gave credit to Kesler for leading the University toward a greater commitment to the kingdom. “Taylor is more evangelical than ever before,” he said. “The manger, the cross and the empty tomb mean more, not less, to us now.”

THE WILL ROGERS OF TAYLOR UNIVERSITY

As Jay’s retirement from the presidency becomes official and he makes the transition to the newly created position of chancellor, long-time friends, coworkers and students are scrambling to offer their thanks to a man whose commitment to Christianity intimately touches the lives of so many.

W. Richard Stephens, retired Greenville College president and Kesler family friend, compared Jay to Will Rogers, whose signature saying was, “I never met a man I didn’t like.” Jay is much like Rogers: the same rough edges, the same salty sense of humor and off-the-cuff wisdom, the same dynamic personality that works its way into your heart with seemingly little effort.

Those who have worked closest with him say the same. “One of the greatest things about Dr. Kesler is that he interacts the same way whether you’re a child or the president of the United States,” says Alberta Miller, Jay’s administrative assistant. “He sees all people as children of God and treats them the same.”

“Taylor is more evangelical than ever before. The manger, the cross and the empty tomb mean more, not less, to us now.”

Caroline Simmons, Jay’s assistant before Miller, recalls one incident that clearly demonstrated his congenial personality. At the end of most of the conferences he speaks at, Jay will tell people that if they’re ever in Upland, they should stop by Taylor University and say hello. This made an impression on one young boy at a family conference. Months later, his family passed through Upland while on vacation, and the son insisted on stopping to see his friend Dr. Kesler. Simmons remembers watching the young family step off the elevator and into the lobby of the president’s office – they had come by to say hello, just as Jay asked. He greeted them with sincerity like they were old family friends.

“He just has a way of making people feel significant and special,” Simmons says.

GOD AND TRUTH

Regular chapel attendees know Jay has a few familiar lines that most clearly express his worldview and the lessons he wants Taylor students to know as they graduate. At the forefront of these is the maxim that “God and truth are synonymous.” Jay first pronounced those words from the auditorium stage at his initial chapel appearance as president. He has repeated them many times since, with the supporting statements:

“If you seem to discover something about God that is contrary to real truth, then you’ve misunderstood God,” he said. “And if you find something about truth, as it were, that seems contrary to your biblical studies, then you’ve misunderstood truth. God and truth are synonymous. The intellectual adventure is not like a frightened person going down the road, turning over rocks, afraid any minute something is going to jump out and eat God.”

Hand-in-hand, the Keslers have spent their lives turning over rocks and preaching the truth of God they find buried underneath. Jay, a true intellectual, has used his inquisitive mind and articulate tongue to make that truth known around the world. YFC, Taylor University, and countless individuals are all the better for it.

Jay’s last chapel address as president at Taylor ended like his first – with a standing ovation. Jay, a little long-winded than he had intended to be, closed that first chapel with these words: “And I’m grateful to be here and grateful you are, and God bless. And now go like mad to your next class so I won’t get in trouble right off, okay?”

Fifteen years later, it is the Taylor community who is grateful he is here, and grateful we have been here to witness it. We ask the blessings of God on both the Keslers. And now, Jay and Janie, go like mad to the next place God is calling.

—Amber L Anderson
Janie Kesler knew the first thing she wanted to do as soon as Jay's retirement from the presidency became official. "I'm going to put on a pair of jeans and not take them off for six months," Janie told one Taylor faculty member. Both Keslers were presented with new Levis at the final faculty meeting of the year, a fitting tribute to a couple who has worn more ties and dress suits than either ever intended.

Retirement from the presidency may mean a change of clothes for Jay, but he certainly will not abandon his commitment to the University.

After several weeks of discussion, Paul Robbins, chair of the Board of Trustees, Jay and incoming president Dr. David Gyertson have outlined the primary responsibilities of the newly created chancellor position, which Jay will fill.

"As the chancellor, Jay is going to primarily be an ambassador-at-large for the University," says Robbins. "He will use his tremendous speaking skills in all kinds of situations to help build bonds between para-church ministries, local churches and universities. He'll be helping families understand why Christian higher education is so important to young people of today."

Jay also will work closely with Gene Rupp, vice president for development, to complete the $75 million capital campaign begun during his presidency. The campaign totals currently rest just short of $60 million; funding for several building projects remains incomplete, as does the initial funding for the planned Kesler Student Activities Center on the Upland campus.

"I'll spend a lot of my time working with Gene on the Capital Campaign," Jay says. "I'll also be available to David [Gyertson] for personal support and love."

Though he anticipates taking a six-month sabbatical from the campus, allowing Gyertson the opportunity to settle in as president, Jay won't quit working. "I don't want to lose my momentum," he says.

Jay and Janie have recently moved into their newly built home on the edge of Upland. The home provides the Keslers with continual reminders of their beloved university: much of the wood working in the house was hand-milled by Jay, using logs cut from Taylor's Upland campus.

In addition to serving as Taylor's chancellor, Jay will increase visibility for the University as the CCCU spokesperson for Christian higher education. The Council for Christian Colleges and Universities named him as their third Distinguished Senior Fellow earlier this spring. As part of Jay's responsibilities, the CCCU is producing a format for a nationwide radio program that will promote Christian higher education, hosted by Jay and its president Dr. Robert Andringa.

Jay also will continue his individual speaking engagements. "If we honored every request, he'd be busy every weekend until the end of time," says Alberta Miller, Jay's assistant. Janie may not allow that to happen, unless she can wear her Levis.

-Amber L. Anderson
Sit in the sanctuaries of some churches on Sunday morning, and you'll find the message met with a chorus of "amen!" when the preacher says something the congregation affirms. Those enthusiastic "amens" are undeniably present when Dr. Kesler and Dr. Gyertson gather for a discussion. Dialogue flows easily between Taylor's past and current presidents, in part because of their shared faith in Christ and their mutual commitment to Christian higher education.

ON THE CHANGES IN THIS GENERATION OF STUDENTS

Dr. Kesler: I think most of the students that were here when I was a student were first generation college-students, and generally from blue-collar type working families. Now, our Taylor students tend to come from much larger second-generation families; there has been a great deal of upward mobility financially within the culture, to where the typical person lives a much better life than they did then. Therefore, the expectation level is much higher.

We had one telephone for instance, when I was a student, to make long-distance calls. And we never used it because we didn't have money. Long-distance was considered a luxury. We had a dorm with one record player in it. We had one television on the whole campus, located in the Swallow-Robin lounge. Now you can blow the circuits in any dorm because everyone has stereos, televisions.

So the change is that the young people have moved with culture; culture has become more technology oriented and expectations are much higher. The idea of entitlement fills cultures today. We had no student financial aid on campus when I came. You were expected to have a job or something like that. Then with the GI Bill, President Johnson decided that everybody ought to be able to go to college. So those are both economic changes. David, there are probably many other things you want to add to that.

Dr. Gyertson: Today's students bring more burdens with them to their college experience than previous generations. Many are the products of broken homes. When I was in college, a child of a single parent family, I was somewhat of an exception. Now a much higher percentage of students are from single parent or blended families. With that come a lot of baggage, with higher levels of personal need. However, it can provide unprecedented opportunities for serious exploration of truth and effective discipleship.

One concern I see is an increase in the percentage of young people who have experienced abuse. What this means for Christian institutions like Taylor is the need to provide a much greater level of service in areas where, just a decade ago, we would have denied students required such help. Our counseling and campus ministry services have expanded dramatically. The good news is that as we are effective in addressing these needs, a new generation of wounded healers is prepared to reach a hurting world.

Dr. Kesler: Academic intensity is another thing. I can't remember very many students when I was in school worrying about their GPAs. People didn't know what a GPA was. They didn't talk about it, at least in my generation, which is before the '60s. The joke we make now is that a teacher comes into a classroom and says, "Good morning," and the students say, "Will this be on the test?" They are so conscious of testing and competition.

Dr. Gyertson: I agree, Jay. Another distinctive of this generation of students is that they tend to be much more comfortable with compartmentalization. One of our greatest challenges as Christian educators is to help students understand the need for a fully integrated life. Some can live very intensely for Jesus, in worship and service for example, but seemingly not struggle with a lack of integrity or consistency in matters of plagiarism, testing, honor code violations and the contemporary culture's emphasis on violence and human sexuality.

Dr. Kesler: It seems to me that the students who are coming today are so into the grace factor, so into the love of God factor, that the performance idea - the idea that there is some sort of performance expected, some lordship aspect, holiness aspect - is pretty much a minority thought among general youth today.

Dr. Gyertson: Well, you've hit it. I think what we're experiencing with some is the lack of a sense of personal responsibility for thought and behavior. Our generation needs to model and expect costly discipleship... a willingness to assume personal responsibility and, as a result, accountability for life in all areas under Christ.

Dr. Kesler: You know, to change the direction just a little bit, one thing that occurs to me that is quite different about students today is that they don't seem to have the ceiling on the lid on their life that we had. At least in my generation, you couldn't aspire.

Today's students really have a high self-esteem. They feel they actually can take on the world. They can rise to the top of industry, entertainment, politics, whatever. They have a much better formed self-esteem than we had. We lived in a culture that was much more class conscious and you couldn't escape that.

Dr. Gyertson: These students place a very high value on transparency. They want to be free to be open about themselves. They value that in their peers and their leaders. One of the reasons that [Dr. Kesler's] presidency has had such a great impact at Taylor is the sense the students have with [her] that "what you see is what you get." There is no hidden agenda. Jay is Jay.
They value honesty. They want to hear the victories. However, they also want to hear about the struggles. They want to touch you where you really are.

ON THE CHANGES IN CHRISTIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

Dr. Gyertson: I believe that one of the greatest challenges we have today is convincing students, in the face of all that society says to the contrary, of the importance of biblical absolutes in beliefs and values.

Dr. Kesler: The whole post-modern idea of truth being personal and based on one’s own bias, one’s own experience is so much a part of the thought process we don’t even recognize it when we see it. We feel very guilty whenever we find ourselves intolerant of anything, any behavior, and any activity at all. It is really difficult for us to somehow find a way to have conviction while still being civil in a culture, which is what the Christian right has not yet discovered how to do. If we are not civil and we’re not tolerant, we are considered somehow not to be compassionate. This is the point in which I think the culture is really struggling today. I don’t blame youth for this. This is not a criticism of youth. They are the products of what we created over many years of a kind of thinking.

Dr. Gyertson: One of the most valuable assets we have in Christian higher education is the faculty — who they are, as well as what they teach. Increasingly the dilemma that faculty face is being fully equipped, personally, spiritually and professionally, to fulfill the mission and vision of Christ-centered higher education to a very different generation of students.

Another significant challenge is the recognition that education can no longer be primarily white and western. We’re discovering that God’s revelations of truth come through a wide range of cultural and historical expressions. The unfolding of the global tapestry of God’s revelation across time and cultures is changing the view and contemporary application of the disciplines in the classic liberal arts. Our students recognize that the world they are inheriting is a complex, multicultural mix of experiences and perspectives. We must do a better job of preparing them for the global opportunities God is unfolding.

Another of the great challenges we face is strengthening our commitment to living, learning, and serving, anchored to biblical revelation. We’ve only just begun to take this responsibility seriously. If we are not careful, much of the education we offer will be nothing more than a Christian glazing of a secular ham. We need to give more attention to helping faculty develop Christ-centered, biblically anchored world-views and applications in their disciplines. We need to come to a place where we’re not just sprinkling holy water on secular learning. We need to assist faculty to challenge the assumptions and suppositions their disciplines are based upon in the light of Christian revelation. Students and parents are both expecting and demanding that examination as the value-added component of a Christ-centered education.

Dr. Kesler: Well, I think as our faculty has become more elite in the sense that a higher percentage of our Christian faculty has terminal degrees, and the terminal degrees are from more prestigious institutions. The professors have been required to do more research and more focusing. It becomes increasingly difficult to be a generalist and to generalize about anything, including how my discipline touches my Christian faith and so on. To me there is a huge pedagogical change taking place.

ON NEW LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

Dr. Gyertson: If the demand for Christ-centered higher education multiplies at the levels we anticipate, we must explore new ways to deliver to those who, for whatever reasons, will not be able to access a full time, residential environment. The traditional 18 to 22 year-old model for getting a college education has changed. Formal learning, by necessity, is life-long. Do the claims of Christ apply to the life-long learner as well as the traditional college-age student? The answer has to be yes! Even if we had enough money, we couldn’t build fast enough to accommodate all of those who want to learn in a Christ-centered environment. Nor could we develop quality faculty fast enough to meet all the needs. To address this challenge, we are faced with the opportunities as well as the limitations of technology as a delivery system.

We’ve typically viewed what we do at the residential liberal arts colleges for 18-22 year olds as the best way to do Christian higher education. I believe it is. However, we have an obligation to the increasing number of learners that will not have the privilege, often because of time or finances, to reside on our campuses. We must provide Christ-centered learning for those who cannot be a part of our residential environment. One of the greatest opportunities before us is to address effectively the Pentecost-like explosion of desire for Christ-centered education. One of the most significant challenges for my generation of faculty is how to teach students that have learned to learn very differently because of technology.

Dr. Kesler: I think this is a very astute observation. The mosaic approach, you know, started long before the computer came into existence. If you study Picasso or any of the Impressionists, they began to communicate art in the same way: splashes of
color, splashes of truth. Then the movies began to do this. We of the literary generation find this all very confusing. Yet the mosaic approach splashes of truth. Then the movies began to do this. We of the literary generation find this all very confusing. Yet the mosaic approach really serves post-modernism and multiculturalism. This is the battle of education today. We cannot be Luaddys at Taylor and ignore all of this. We have to find a way to adapt the gospel to meet the needs of this modern mosaic. Which I think is such a confounding thing to older people. We just can’t comprehend; we watch a movie and there are 25 themes thrown at you before you can find the central thread. Yet it all makes sense.

Dr. Gyertson: I think the best example of this is the typical Internet web page. There isn’t just one set of neatly arranged materials there. There are probably 5, 10, 15 or 20 things – much of it unrelated and disconnected. You’re being splashed, some feel drowned, by all the information.

This new generation of technology-based learners really challenges me. They have the ability (this may be the result of the compartmentalization we mentioned earlier) to be multi-tasked in the way they approach life. They often have five or six windows open, so to speak, all running at the same time. We’ve created a generation that can work simultaneously on several competing levels. With God’s help we can meet that challenge of preparing them to serve the present age, their calling to fulfill. And, as the hymn writer concludes, “O may it all our powers engage to do the Master’s will!”

Closing comments from Dr. Kesler: As we were sharing opinions during this interview, I sensed a great compatibility intellectually and spiritually with Dr. Gyertson. This was reassuring and encouraging to me, especially as I grow older and the generation gap with students widens. Dr. Gyertson is younger, more “with it” and much more a man of this era, yet deeply anchored to the essentials of the Christian faith and the Taylor ethos. There are great days ahead.

Dear Jay & Janie:

I remember seeing you, Dr. Kesler, in Fort Wayne at Blackhawk Baptist Church. My son was a baby and I explained my singleness. You said something to me that day that encourages me even now, “I’m very proud of you.” You will never know how much that meant to me then – and now! I felt I had disappointed my family, and you filled the gap for me at that time. God has greatly used my son to teach me. He has also greatly blessed us with my husband Todd and Spencer’s younger brother Tucker.

Janie, while you were not always a highly visible presence on campus every day, you were a model for me after which to pattern my life. Your commitment to family, and the support you gave your husband, showed me the kind of wife and mother I want to be.

Tammy (Hittle ’90) Germain Fort Wayne, Ind.

Dear Jay & Janie:

Congratulations on bringing an extraordinary era of leadership and achievement to Taylor University. It seems like just a short time ago that I was with you for the inaugural of your presidency and witnessed the strong and loving support which you had already found with students, faculty, alumni and friends of Taylor University. You have confidently applied your prior experience and utilized an ever-present wellspring of support and affection to build unity among all of Taylor’s constituencies toward the goal of ensuring the long-term health of the University.

My office has been the beneficiary of very talented Taylor University undergraduates and graduates who have served the people of Indiana and our country with a foundation of academic excellence and strong religious faith, prime attributes of Taylor University.

I wish both of you many significant adventures in the years that lie ahead. You have enriched the educational opportunities for all students in Indiana. We are grateful for your creativity and your steadfast witness.

Sincerely,
Richard G. Lugar
United States Senator
Washington, D.C.

Dear Jay & Janie:

I look back at Taylor and realize how much fun I had there. Those were the best days of my life! Taylor is such a special and unique place and I’m so thankful that I found it. I’ve noticed that there is a certain pride that every Taylor graduate has. Whenever you hear the school mentioned, we all sort of puff up a bit and say, “That’s where I went to school.” Everyone who visits can feel that pride and can know it exists, but to truly understand where that pride and commitment come from, you have to be an insider. That’s what you and Janie were to all of us. The insiders who understood just how wonderful our university is because you attended here. You lived in our dorms, you ate at the DC, played in the gym and know the history. You and Janie are Taylor University and you instilled that feeling of pride and belonging in every single person who came to Taylor. You made us feel at home in Upland. You opened your hearts and your home to the student body and for that, we can never say thank you enough.

Kate (Snow ’99) Sutcliffe
Indianapolis, Ind.

Dear Jay:

I couldn’t let this celebration pass without penning a warm note of hearty congratulations. A friend told me recently that college presidents never die ... they just lose their faculties!
Jay and Janie

You are truly world-class, my friend. Your work through the years with Youth for Christ and Taylor University, among other organizations, stands as a testament to your love for the Lord and His people. I have a feeling you won’t really be slowing down much. I’m sure there are projects and plans you’ve determined to undertake. And yet, if anyone deserves to take a few days off it’s you, Jay. So … take them.

Charles R. Swindoll HN’86
President, Dallas Theological Seminary
Dallas, Texas

My Dear Jay & Janie,

Betty joins me in sending our warmest congratulations upon your retirement and our sincere thanks for all you have done for Taylor University in these past years. We know your continued influence will be felt through the life and fabric of the institution.

Though our paths have not crossed with frequency, we treasure our friendship that goes back to those glorious ’50s when the world was perfect. Nat Cole, the Harmonicats, The Four Aces, Les Paul and Mary Ford, and the magical Milan basketball team! Youth for Christ rallies were springing up like mushrooms all over the central plains and we were learning to serve the Lord, green as grass but eager and zealous. As Archie Bunker would say, “Those were the days.”

Our personal memories stretch over almost 15 years from double-dating with Janie and Glenn Crabb (I still have a picture) and those terror-filled hours in Greek class. Serving together as “student evangelists” in our senior year and working together on Youth Conference 1957 were the highlights.

God’s grace has preserved us and continues to use us, old and withered though we may be. May that grace fill your lives with joy and peace as the magic day approaches. Dominus Vobiscum.

With love,
Kenn ’57 & Betty (Blackburn ’58),
Gangel
Toccoa Falls, Ga.

Dear Jay & Janie,

Before you leave us in the official capacity of president and first lady of Taylor University, we want to tell you both what a pleasure it has been to have had you, our long-time friends, in the top position at Taylor University. Knowing a little of the history of the University, we know that your leadership for the school
was badly needed at the time when you folks came.

Thank you for the great way in which you welcomed the Fort Wayne campus into the Taylor family. We have sensed nothing but good will from you folks, Daryl, the other officials and the Board. The many times you have come up I-69 to our campus to speak in chapel, to attend committee meetings and to participate in other activities on our campus are evidence of your desire to see this campus thrive under the Lord’s blessing. We are also very glad that you will be staying on in another official capacity with the University.

As you change “hats,” may God bless you both and help Taylor University to continue on growing and thriving spiritually and in every other way possible. We wish you the Lord’s best and assure you of our prayer support in the days ahead in your new position. We are very glad that you are not leaving us altogether.

Sincerely,
Wes (TUFW ’51) & Mary (Steiner TUFW ’52) Gerg
Fort Wayne, Ind.

Dear Jay & Janie:
This may be a strange way to get an appreciation letter but I wanted you to know the span of your influence. I am a mother of three children under five and wife of a pastor on staff at Northpoint Community Church in Alpharetta, Ga. Today I was eating with my three children and my husband was still at church. One of your students on spring break assisted me without hesitation! What a refreshing thing from a college student! He saw that I was struggling with the drinks, high chair and food (and baby too!) I thought to myself, “He must be a Christian to be so helpful!” My daughter’s name is Taylor and we talked about that, which led to him mentioning your school. What a wonderful school you must have to have a student on spring break be willing to help a mother of three and serve as he did! Thank you for giving to the Lord! You obviously have had a great influence on at least this young man. In a world where most college students are self-absorbed, this particular young man went out of his way, in front of his friends, to assist a stranger. That is what life is all about! “Love your neighbor.” Thank you for teaching character that helped me in my need.

Sincerely,
Pamela Holliday
Alpharetta, Ga.

Dear Jay & Janie:
I graduated from Taylor in 1974 so I knew you neither as a student nor as president, but I want to take this opportunity to thank you for your service to our Father God through your leadership. As a missionary with Wycliffe Bible Translators, I have not been able to revisit Taylor’s campus or even attend alumni functions. I do read almost every page of the alumni magazine and have listened to your program on the radio while on furloughs. I know God has used you in the lives of students and staff, that the academic institution is better than ever and that you have kept the spiritual foundations strong. My time at Taylor was blessed by faculty, friends, courses and experiences. I am always proud to tell people I graduated from Taylor University.

May you continue to see the fruit of your labors in the years ahead.
Carolyn (Barton ’74) Mudge
Honira, Solomon Islands

Dear Jay & Janie,
What a privilege it has been to have known you as students and then to have worked together at Taylor years later. I have so many wonderful memories of our times together in the ’50s – as students and as head residents. I remember the week of revival services that you preached at our little Methodist church in Roll, Jay. This must have been in 1956 or 1957. I still remember some of your messages! I remember the fun we had as head residents in Swallow Robin and Morris Hall and our many, many meals together in the “dome.” I remember the hot, dirty, sweaty guys rushing in from the gym or football field and right before dinner, putting on the sports jackets they left hanging by the door and being led around the room by Roberta Kessler and placed at particular tables while a student played the piano. And, Janie, I remember the music classes we had together with Hilda Steyer in the basement of Shriner. Who would have believed then that we would be back at Taylor to celebrate her 80th birthday? We had some very special people in those classes.

Janie, you are a perfect first lady.
You are a gracious, gentle, kind, friendly, beautiful person and I count it a real privilege to know you and to call you my friend. You know how to handle every situation with poise and dignity. How fortunate Jay has been to have you by his side throughout his ministry and what a blessing you have been to this campus.

Jay, God prepared you well to become Taylor’s president. Your spiritual leadership, your deep insights into the Scripture, your mastery at presenting a message, your humor, your compassion, your love for people never cease to amaze me. You are loved by students, faculty, staff and retirees.

With Christian love,
Marian Kendall
Upland, Ind.

Dear Jay & Janie:

My name is Holly Hines, and I was at Taylor Upland in 94-97. I will never forget coming to your house and having ice-cream when I transferred in as a sophomore from TUFW. I will also never forget how personal you were to us every time you spoke. I have told many of my friends, who have gone to other Christian colleges and universities, how awesome you were the entire four years of my stay at Taylor. I call you Jay because that is how close I feel. My friends can’t even tell me what their president looked like, let alone be able to call him by his first name and feel the warmth of all the great memories his name holds. I am very privileged to have had you as my president, leader, grandfather and fellow Christian.

The very last chapel I went to my senior year, you spoke on Jesus being my shepherd. That day was a turning point in my life. Then, when you gave us our class word that says, Seek ye first the kingdom of God and all his righteousness, and he will embarrass you with his goodness, that as well changed my life. I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

I love you.
Holly Hines ’97
Bloomington, Ind.

Dear Jay & Janie,

Congratulations on completing your historic presidency of Taylor University. What a remarkable gift you have been to both Taylor and the broad Christian and educational community. The number of individual lives and institutions you have touched would be thoroughly impossible to calculate, and your many, many friends are deeply indebted to you.

Jeanette and I were greatly privileged to know you during our days in Youth for Christ and greatly profited from our association with you and your family. We remember with appreciation being in your home for dinner and sharing in your warm, committed hospitality.

Let me also thank you on behalf of Christianity Today for the marvelous writing which you have done – a great deal over the years for various magazines - and for your leadership and insights shared on the Board.

Jay, may you and Janie continue your deeply, deeply appreciated leadership roles as you enter a new phase of your lives. May the Lord give you great energy and continuing wisdom. With so many of your friends, we say that we truly do love you and your family, and we pray the very best for you.

Sincerely,
Harold L. Myra.
President, Christianity Today, Inc.
Carol Stream, Ill.

Dear Jay & Janie,

In 1948 I entered Taylor as a freshman, met my husband-to-be and was gone by the time Jay arrived to begin his Taylor connection. Later my three children attended TU, but they were all graduated by the time Jay returned as president. Therefore, my memory of Jay and Janie has nothing to do with the Kesler campus tenure.

I actually met you both in Athens where I joined the Taylor tour of Greece and Israel in 1996. You, Jay, added a spiritual dimension that the tour guides couldn’t match and which enriched my trip experience immensely. However, the respect, love and thoughtful consideration you gave your mother and mother-in-law on that trip was a testimony that spoke so much about you both. You, Jay, may have been the president of a fine college but your were Elsie’s son first. Your roles as a caring son and daughter-in-law exemplified a practical application of scriptural teaching. Your credibility as genuine Christians skyrocketed in my eyes.

Sincerely,
Marian (Munson ’x51) Collins
Greenwood, Ind.
Lives well lived

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