

Transformed to Love

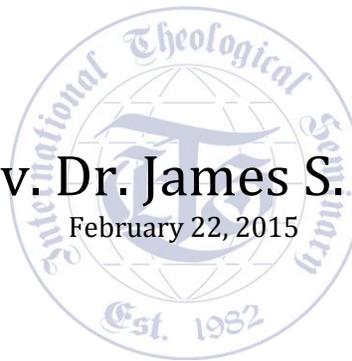
President's Address

The Inauguration of James S. Lee as the Seventh President of
International Theological Seminary

Acts 2:14-17

Rev. Dr. James S. Lee

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International Theological Seminary
3215-3225 North Tyler Avenue
El Monte, CA 91731 USA
Tel 626-448-0023 | Fax 626-350-6343
www.itsla.edu

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ITS Board Members, administrative and faculty colleagues, staff, alums, students, esteemed delegates and guests, family and friends. Thank you for coming. Truly, I am so grateful for each of you for joining us this day.

I am deeply humbled and moved to stand before you today. This sanctuary holds special meaning for me. Back in 2007, my wife, Charlene, was serving this congregation as Director of Christian Education. I would come to this sanctuary to worship on Sundays when I was strong enough. At that time, I was going through intense treatments after being diagnosed with cancer. As I sat in one of the pews where you are sitting now, I contemplated my future. Would I make it? Would I be given another chance to stand on a pulpit and preach? Many thoughts would cross my mind – some hopeful, others despairing. I can only attest that it is by God's **grace** that I stand today to represent International Theological Seminary, an institution I have come to respect and serve.

As I was preparing for this address, a biblical passage I thought of was Apostle Peter's speech on the day of Pentecost in the Book of Acts: "People of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these people are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. (It is only three o'clock in the afternoon in our case.) No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: 'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.'"

This great vision of the ancient prophet Joel was unfolding on the day of Pentecost. And this powerful vision is still unfolding today as the people of God, transcending nationality, ethnicity, culture, age, and gender, gather – worshipping and proclaiming the *magnalia Dei*, the great work of our mighty Lord and Savior. **This** is the vision of the church for the world.

I often recollect my first day at ITS. I was invited to teach an Old Testament course. It was a cold early January morning. I walked into a classroom full of strangers; unfamiliar faces with names I could not pronounce. But quickly, I felt welcome and appreciated by the group of students who were ready and eager to learn.

International Theological Seminary is a learning and worshipping faith community that has been striving to embody this vision for more than 30 years. We reserve a place for all who come from distant places of the world. We offer them hospitality, service, and feasting on the Word. At ITS, there is no distinction of the first, the second, and the third worlds or the developing and the developed nations. We acknowledge that we are all debtors to the Gospel. With Christ being the center and head of this community, we humbly submit ourselves to one another to afford an opportunity to minister and to be ministered by one another. ITS is a community built on mutual trust; in spite of our numerous differences, we see one another as created in God's image and witness the Holy Spirit working in each person's life. At ITS, you are welcome and loved because Christ has become our peace; he has broken down the barriers of differences and prejudice that too often separate us.

ITS seeks to be a community much like that of the early church, born out of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. We believe that the distinctiveness of every culture are unique gifts from God. We intend to speak the language of healing, forgiveness, and empowerment in our learning and educational endeavors.

I believe that being an authentic Holy Spirit-born community means being a liminal community. The word "liminal" comes from the Latin word *limen*, which means "threshold" – on the border. Liminal people are those who are "betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial."¹ In other words, liminal people are not bound by social boundaries; they freely cross from one side to another. They are transitional people who don't belong to one place or another. They are intentionally set apart from the places of belonging. However, "it is in this liminal experience that something new can emerge."² Being removed from a place of familiarity, to a third space, their assumptions and presuppositions are challenged, and there is opportunity to envision a new reality. One emerges from a liminal state with a new identity and creative vision. The Holy Spirit invites believers into this liminal space, where we are initiated into a new kind of community. A community with radical principles that orient one's perspective to a new social vision.

¹ Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Aldine Transaction: Piscataway, NJ, 2008), 95.

² Sang Hyun Lee, *From a Liminal Place: An Asian American Theology* (Fortress: Minneapolis, 2010), 7.

I once saw a bumper sticker that said, “What does not kill you makes you stranger.” I was familiar with the saying, “What does not kill you makes you stronger.” It was the first time reading a variation of the saying. However, it resonated with me. It was not long after I had undergone surgery. I knew exactly what it meant to be in the liminal space of between-life-and-death. A close encounter with death bends and twists your vision of life in a dizzying and disorienting way, so that you become a stranger to those around you and they become strangers to you.

However, when you come in close contact with the reality of death, you gain a new vision of life. While the liminal experience may cause the risk of isolation and misunderstanding, it also empowers those who go through the experience and endows them with a unique perspective on life. No longer does fear dictate your life. You become emboldened to live a life differently – choosing to live a life abundant, a life that is self-giving for you and others.

Similarly, I envision ITS standing in the space of liminality as we seek to overcome ethnic, racial, and gender boundaries. Many of our students have left their family, ministry, and homeland to study at ITS. The Seminary is a completely new setting away from all the familiarities they have known and the social contexts they are used to. In this “betwixt and between” place, we can celebrate all that each person brings to the community.

As the liminal space provides a unique perspective on life and ministry, the Holy Spirit who creates the liminal community will also empower it. Such a community will be rife for powerful and creative ministries. Through the power of the gospel, the community becomes both transformed and transforming.

This is the mission of International Theological Seminary: to equip and train teachers, community leaders, and pastors in the Reformed tradition, who can help transform local communities into vibrant places of worship, mission, and justice.

At ITS, we practice being the very kind of community that we envision in this mission. Our pursuit of community formation and spiritual formation takes place in a residential theological learning setting. I emphasize residential, because we believe that sharing physical space with others in learning is essential in relationship- and community-building. This community-building

does not take place only in classrooms, when students discuss Scripture, theology, and ministry. Community is formed through the daily sharing of meals, worshipping and praying together in chapel, discussing in hallways, and hanging out in the dormitory, where life and stories are heard and told.

In the 21st century, mission is changing. The mission field is no longer divided by political and geographical boundaries. The mission field is contiguous from outside our home all the way to countries across the mountains, rivers, and oceans. The mission field is no longer out there, but in our backyard and neighborhood as well. Our children are growing up in a society that is increasingly more multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious.

In coping with this changing landscape of our country, the ITS board has renewed recently its commitment to ministering to our own surrounding community in the Greater Los Angeles area and beyond. We seek to embody a “glocal” community, where the local community meets the world. ITS already has great connections with different ethnic communities and churches in Southern California. We will continue to strengthen these ties for mission and evangelism and also will extend the opportunity for theological training for local lay leaders and pastors of immigrant communities in Southern California. Within this setting, as international students come to ITS, they can be connected to local congregations in the LA area. Local churches can provide a place of spiritual nurture and growth for ITS students who come with vibrant faith and testimonies of the living God who acts and moves in the world.

Christianity is rapidly growing in the region we call the “Global South.” Once, they were the recipients of the Gospel. Now they are the future of the Church, our equal-partners in ministry. ITS would like to participate in the exciting work God is already doing in the world.

The world we live in is a perilous, uncertain place. We are being bombarded daily with images of utter violence being committed against humanity. We feel overwhelmed by the immensity of problems around the world and disconnected because of their distant reality and the comfortable space which we inhabit. However, Christ beckons us to step into the liminal place, where we may feel hopelessly lost and yet strangely renewed and strengthened to move and act in love.

Last summer, I traveled to Nigeria and Cameroon with a vision team that was made up of local pastors, ITS professors and students. It was an act of faith for many of us because we heard about the horrendous acts of Boko Haram being done in the region. Our family and friends were concerned for our safety. However, when we arrived there, we found many thriving and flourishing churches in spite of recent bombings. Church members including pastors would go through metal detectors to worship on Sundays; yet bombing threats did not stifle the zeal and commitment of these faithful Christians. Many expressed their gratitude for our coming. They saw that Christians in the U.S. cared for them enough to take the risk of coming and standing in solidarity with Christians of Nigeria and Cameroon, and they were greatly encouraged.

For me, Christ's ultimate calling for mission is about having deep compassion and care for all peoples and cultures, especially those who are suffering and afflicted. How can we go and make disciples of all nations unless we care for and love them? Our ideology or sense of obligation will not do. Only genuine love through the conviction by the Holy Spirit will compel us to partake in the Great Commission. Are we willing to see the image of God in every person in spite of sin that has distorted and disfigured it?

I believe that the love that transcends boundaries to reach out to those who suffer has been the spirit of ITS. It compelled our founder, Dr. John E. Kim, and other presidents, including Dr. Joseph Tong and Dr. Mel Loucks, who are with me today, to serve the ITS community tirelessly during their respective tenures.

Convicted and compelled by the love, I am standing here before you, willing to carry on the legacy. I am humbled and honored to represent the institution I respect deeply. I promise before God and before you that I will do my best to lead the Seminary into the future, if God's grace carries me.

I would like to close with another vision shared by a prophet with a strange name, Habakkuk. (The name Habakkuk has a beautiful meaning – I wish more children were named Habakkuk. It means “to embrace” as in embracing the outcast and poor. Charlene and I liked the name so much that we seriously thought about naming our son Habakkuk, but we held back and named him Harold.)

Habakkuk is a troubled prophet. Unlike other prophets who deliver divine messages to their people, Habakkuk speaks to God on behalf of his people and expresses his frustration with the way God is dealing with the wicked and unjust. He becomes the interrogator of God and asks a series of questions about God's justice. God replies graciously and patiently to Habakkuk three times. God firmly assures Habakkuk that justice will prevail in the end and encourages the righteous to live by faith. Along with the reply, Habakkuk receives a vision that one day the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, just as the waters cover the sea. Habakkuk sees and knows in part but receives a word from the Lord that, one day, the entire earth will understand and know the way of the Lord. So he continues to persevere in hope, faith, and love.

It is my hope and prayer that in the imperfection of our knowledge, we, too, will live our life guided by faith, hope, and love. It is also my desire that faith, hope, and love be the cornerstone of all theological pursuits at ITS. May the Lord's will be done. Amen.