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The Unquiet History of the Jessie C. Eury Library

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On Tuesday, October 9, 2007, the Lincoln Christian College and Seminary campus community and special guests came together to celebrate and express gratitude for the new positive learning environment created for our students through the estate gift of the founding librarian and a local community foundation. Collectively we re-dedicated the Jessie C. Eury library to its vital role to facilitate the lifelong learning of its students by providing essential resources, services, and instruction. The highlight of this special event was the presentation of the following essay – “The Unquiet History of the Jessie C. Eury Library of Lincoln Christian College and Seminary” – by Dr. Robert Lowery, Dean of the Seminary. Dr. Lowery’s passion for teaching, speaking, writing, reading, and libraries is evident to his students, colleagues, and readers around the world. His New Testament scholarship is reflected in this essay and his latest book, Revelation’s Rhapsody: Listening to the Lyrics of the Lamb (How to Read the Book of Revelation). As you read his essay may you join us in offering God the ultimate honor and glory for the biblical and theological foundation of our libraries.

“Unquiet” is not a word we usually link with any kind of library – public or private, let alone the Jessie C. Eury Library of Lincoln Christian College and Seminary.

Surely, over the last several weeks this building has been everything else but quiet, at least from the obvious perspective. The sounds of voices, hammers, drills, instructions being given, paint brushes and rollers swooshing all over the walls and carpet being laid. The medieval artisans who built the cathedrals throughout Europe that still stand were taught that they were always to be building for the glory of God. Likewise, libraries like this are never complete. There must always be building and rebuilding.

But today I use the word “unquiet” on a deeper level. This is a term I link with all libraries – public and personal. I use “unquiet” in its primary sense of “agitated,” “restless,” “uneasy,” or “turbulent.” Some of the most uncomfortable and unsettling moments I have ever experienced occurred in a library, be it the Hawthorne Public library on the west side of Indianapolis where I grew up or in the libraries in Boston, Aberdeen (Scotland), or Lincoln where I received my formal education.

The word “unquiet” describes what I have experienced when using this library or my own personal library in my office at home or at school or when I have read one of my hundreds of digitalized books in an airport or in a hotel room, bathed in the glow cast by the screen of my laptop computer.

I have spent thousands of hours in a variety of libraries in numerous places. I have encountered words in one form or another – words spoken or written or heard or visualized – words that have created an unquiet spirit within me, words that, when wedded or tempered by God’s Word and God’s Holy Spirit, have changed me by comforting or challenging me. It was in this place where I first read C.S. Lewis, Francis Schaeffer, E.F. Bruce, and Henri Nouwen, and my life was changed radically. It was here that I first began translating the Greek and Hebrew Scriptures into English. It was in this place that I first became familiar with concordances and commentaries. Those unquiet moments caused me to love God more fully with my heart, soul, and mind – often in mind and soul-rattling ways as well heart-breaking or heart-mending ways. I am not only a better person because of libraries, but especially I am a better servant of God’s Word in God’s world because of the words I encountered in this library and others like it.

One of the few places that a public library is alluded to in Scripture is John 21:25 where we read John’s closing thought: “Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.”

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Remarks for Lincoln Christian College and Seminary Open House on October 9, 2007

Opening remarks by Nancy Olson.
Such a statement is either a librarian’s dream or nightmare, depending on the day of the week. And think of the patrons who, if everything said and done by Jesus had indeed been written down, would be even more justified in wearing the sweatshirt declaring “So many books, so little time.”

John’s observation is a remarkable one for us to ponder as we celebrate the remodeling of this library by thanking those who have worked so hard and thanking God for giving us his blessing. It is a good statement to reflect on for at least four reasons.

First, it is remarkable when we recall the ancient tradition that John lived in Ephesus in Asia Minor – modern day Turkey – when he wrote his gospel. Ephesus was a city that could boast that it had the ancient world’s third largest library, surpassed only by the libraries in Pergamum (just up the road) and Alexandria, Egypt. How many times did John walk by the Ephesian edifice and think: “Not even this building with its statues of four women personifying the virtues of wisdom, moral excellence, thought, and knowledge can surpass what Jesus said and did and how he himself modeled wisdom, excellence, thought and knowledge!”

Second, the apostle’s assertion is amazing when we recall that no doubt John knew the story of the burning of personal libraries in Ephesus, an event recorded in Acts 19:18-20. We read that many Ephesians who had accepted Jesus as God’s Son did something radical. Luke writes: “A number who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. When they calculated the value of the scrolls, the total came to fifty thousand drachmas (50,000 days of wages). In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.” The citizens of Ephesus had rejected evil words to accept the true Word of the Lord.

Third, there is a final place where the library in Ephesus casts a shadow over one more book found in the New Testament library. I refer to Paul’s portable library mentioned in his exhortation to his colleague Timothy recorded in II Timothy 4:13 – “When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, and my scrolls, especially the parchments.” This short letter, probably Paul’s last, was recorded while he was in prison in Rome, and Timothy was likely ministering in Ephesus. How many times did Timothy walk past the Ephesian public library? I have wanted to know the contents of Paul’s scrolls and parchments. Perhaps there were some personal letters, possibly some of the books of Scripture, and even maybe some writings by Stoic philosophers or Cretan poets. We know that Paul was a well-read man, able to quote a prophet or a philosopher or a poet in the same sermon or letter. And yet I am convinced that all of the books and letters that Paul wanted ultimately connected with Christ.

Fourth, John’s statement is exceptional when we realize that Jesus is the link between these three passages of Scripture that speak about public and private libraries. Jesus, the Word became flesh, preached words and performed deeds, so many in fact that a record of them could not be contained in the libraries at Alexandria, Pergamum, Ephesus, and all the other libraries throughout the Roman world.

And so we need to be reminded that our library is bound up with Jesus as well. The connection has the potential to make many people in our world agitated. I have read in history books that one of the first centers of a culture attacked by invading armies is the library, from ancient Greece and Rome to the wars in the twentieth century and the disturbances today. All libraries have an unquiet history because, to many who want to control people, libraries are a threat. Beware! Once you enter a library, your thoughts and your actions will never be the same.

The Jessie C. Eury Library has an unquiet history. Indeed, it has been anything but a quiet, restful, calm, easy-going place. Libraries must never be.
In spite of the inappropriate efforts of tyrants to shut the doors of libraries and despite the appropriate efforts of librarians and their assistants to “Shush” us, libraries are ultimately to be linked with noise, with “the Shout!”

For when the doors of libraries are opened or the libraries within libraries that are unlocked with the click of a button on the laptop and thousands of books are made available, watch out! It will not be long before there will be shouts because of the words read and heard. Lives will be changed and nations reborn.

Even quiet libraries have their own sounds, don’t they? The sound of a book or journal sliding off the shelf ... a student’s sigh or giggles caused by the discovery of new words or new worlds ... the scratching of a pen gliding across a piece of paper ... the clickety-clack sound of the Royal typewriter in my student days on this campus ... the guiding words of a staff member “Let me show you where the reference work is” or the whispered sad news “The book is checked out!” and the groan that follows because the paper is due that afternoon ... or the commanding question that sounds like the homeland security people at the airport: “May I see your ID, please?” ... the soft, rapid tapping on the keyboard of the laptops of today’s students ... the hum of the photocopy machine ... the sound of the printer spitting out page after page ... the clicking of a pen or the thumping of a pencil on the desktop as a student is provoked by some words encountered ... the alarm system jarring all, warning of the potential getaway of an unintentional or intentional biblio-thief ... and the books returning from one home to another as they drop through the chute ...

Mike Reid, Assistant Librarian, penned me these words from his library office and sent them to my personal library office:

The library is filled with quiet motion as students and staff work, study, read, think, learn, and live – a modern monastery for part-time monks, lifelong students; a library

All of these sounds of silence, sounds ancient and sounds modern, anticipate louder ones. For students who are lifelong learners and lifelong leaders cannot keep quiet with what they have learned within these walls. There is a time for holy silence and a time for holy racket.

May this always be the case for the Jessie C. Eury Library, a place that holds more than 140,000 items! It is a setting that serves people who are committed to a purpose. The students, faculty, staff, and administrators and other patrons of this library must take what they have learned in this place and share with the world that all the knowledge stored in all of the delivery systems found in this library must ultimately lead to taking captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ (II Cor. 10:5).

The stuff of revolutions and revivals is found in this place. Above all, the silence gives way to sharing the good news about Jesus.

Certainly, for more than sixty years the alums of this library have revealed how subversive this place is and how visits here changed their lives and how the message they have shared have transformed the lives of millions.

The twenty-first century alums of this library must be anything but quiet with what they find in this place and with what they do with those discoveries in the days ahead.

May the unquiet history of this place continue. May it persist so that those who have studied here use the knowledge they have gained to turn this world upside down in the name of Jesus and for the glory of God.

May it continue so that if John were to return to earth and he would see all that has been done in the name of Jesus by the followers of Jesus, he would write about the church,

All libraries have an unquiet history because, to many who want to control people, libraries are a threat. Beware! Once you enter a library, your thoughts and your actions will never be the same.
Christ’s body, “If every deed were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.”

May the unquiet history of this place persevere in impacting the world until Jesus comes and the final chapter of life on this earth will have been written. Earthly libraries filled with millions and millions of books ultimately will become obsolete because in the end only one volume truly counts, God’s book of life.

The words encountered here must take us to the Word, Jesus. Woeful are we if we know all of the words in this library if we know not Jesus, the Word!

In my imagination, at the entrance to this library, I see a plaque that beckons:

“Welcome to all who desire to be lifelong learners so that they can be lifelong leaders whose mission is to know the Christ, the Word over all words, Christ, the Lord over all libraries, and to make that Christ known.”