

A Firm Foundation

GERRIT W. GONG

BYU 2021 graduating class, ladies and gentlemen, brothers and sisters, and friends, it is a special privilege for Sister Gong and me to be here with Elder and Sister Johnson, President and Sister Worthen, members of the BYU President's Council, our college deans, and each of you.

Thank you, Alyssa Baer, for representing our graduates so well. Thank you, BYU Singers for "Alleluia."

Congratulations, Marcus Roberts, on receiving an honorary doctorate from Brigham Young University. We honor your contributions to life and society.

Some years ago, I made up a little ditty about standing and sitting. It goes like this: "I hope those on the stand understand how long we can stand to sit."

On a graduation occasion such as this, then Elder Boyd K. Packer recited:

*The month of June approaches,
And soon across the land*

*The graduation speakers
Will tell us where we stand.*

*We stand at Armageddon,
In the vanguard of the press;
We're standing at the crossroads,
At the gateway to success.*

*We're standing upon the threshold
Of careers all brightly lit.
But in the midst of all this standing,
We sit and sit and sit.¹*

With his educator's heart and twinkling eye, Elder Packer said that that little piece was called, "Oh, My Aching Baccalaureate."

Six Congratulations

This is an unusual time, inviting a different kind of pomp and circumstance, but the feelings of celebration, relief, excitement, anticipation, and gratitude that accompany a BYU graduation are as

Gerrit W. Gong, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, delivered this commencement address on April 22, 2021.

real as ever. Perhaps these graduation feelings are even intensified as we gather in our own places and spaces.

To each BYU graduate, congratulations! And congratulations to family, friends, faculty and staff, and each who have contributed to today's significant achievements—semester by semester, class by class, and tuition check by tuition check. You may have wondered if this day would ever come, and now it is here.

I am grateful for fourteen years here at Brigham Young University. You may be thinking, "Boy, was he slow to graduate." Actually, I graduated punctually after four years, then later returned as a member of the BYU faculty and administration.

My congratulations to you graduating today reflect things I learned as a student and on things I have since come to understand about the way BYU approaches education and why you can be proud to be a graduate of Brigham Young University. I am grateful for the firm foundation on which BYU is founded and the firm foundation BYU helps us establish for our lives.

In that spirit, let me give you six congratulations!

First, congratulations to you first university graduates in your family. Three cheers for you and for those who love and encourage you as you embark on a lifelong educational journey that will bless generations. We are proud that Brigham Young University cares deeply about offering educational opportunities to those from every background and circumstance.

I am told that about 12 percent of you graduating today are first-generation university graduates.²

For example, Loriana Goulding—an aspiring law student with a strong background in finance, leadership, and analytical research—said she has enjoyed getting involved in club leadership.

Gerardo Gamino—a first-generation Mexican student from California studying physiology and developmental biology—cofounded Puente, a nonprofit organization to help Latino parents and their children access higher education.

Congratulations, Loriana, Gerardo, and each first-generation university graduate! We are proud

of you, and you have much to be proud of as a graduate from BYU.

Second, a special salute to you graduates who made on-campus employment part of your education. Depending on the year, that includes some 40 to 60 percent of our graduates.

You got up early and you stayed late. You worked hard and you accomplished much. We are proud of a university that, with great intentionality, offers excellent education, recognized affordable value, and significant on-campus employment opportunities so that our BYU graduates can achieve both a fine education and one of our country's lowest student debt rates.

This of course also pays tribute to many across campus who make student employment a meaningful learning opportunity while helping this great campus run.

Among many, here are three examples of BYU graduates who worked and learned.

Arden Ashton got up at 5 a.m. to be at work by 6 a.m. in the Building Care and Specialty Services Department, where Shawna Martin was "a friend, true mentor, and role model."

Preston Adams said that he learned to be proactive, plan, and understand himself better while taking sixteen credits and working twenty hours a week at the Missionary Training Center.

Tyler Tolman said he will really miss his accounts payable clerk job. In addition to accounting, Tyler learned "how to stay focused while working virtually, how to be a good teammate, how to communicate more effectively, and how to finish tasks by deadlines."

As an aside, I remember with appreciation working as a student employee in the BYU Chinese department years ago.

Third, congratulations to our graduates who have been part of multiple examples of what the educational world covets and calls high-impact practices (HIP).

You probably didn't know how "HIP" you are!

As measured by national educational criteria, 76 percent of our BYU graduates have participated in two or more high-impact practices, such as "research with faculty," "enjoyed an internship

or field experience,” or had the opportunity to “study abroad.”

By comparison, only 60 percent of students among Carnegie peers and 53 percent of students at large institutions with enrollments above 20,000 students have had similar undergraduate opportunities. This is a tribute to you for making the most of your time at BYU. It is also a voice of appreciation to our BYU faculty and staff for making your academic learning and success a priority of their own.

Emilee Severe, from Terreton, Idaho, is both a unique but also representative example. Graduating with a bachelor’s degree in environmental science, Emily was recently awarded a prestigious Marie Curie fellowship. Her PhD program at Lancaster University in England includes working with an international and interdisciplinary team researching microplastics pollution in agriculture.

Like many of you BYU high-impact practice students, Emilee has taken initiative in experiential learning opportunities, has learned Chem 105 homework was “actually applicable in the real world,” and is helping with women’s educational experiences in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) classrooms.

Emily spoke for many when she said, “There wasn’t a single experience that led me to being a Marie Curie fellow.” It was, she continued, the “tiny moments in research labs, internships, and conversations with professors that gave me the courage to move forward.”

Congratulations, Emily, and congratulations to each graduate as you build with gratitude on a firm BYU foundation.

Fourth, congratulations to you graduates who are pursuing your educational and professional dreams.

After Harvard and Stanford Universities, BYU has the highest percentage of students who attend after being accepted. You came to BYU because you wanted to. And now you are well prepared to go forth to serve in home and community and in further schooling and professional and employment opportunities and capacities. You are the reason why, over the past ten years, that BYU is

ranked ninth in the world and sixth in the United States for the number of students who complete a doctorate degree.

For those of you who will pursue professional degrees in business, law, medicine, dentistry, and so on, you can be proud of the high acceptance and completion rates among BYU graduates who have gone before you. Thank you for continuing BYU’s reputation for outstanding graduates of achievement, integrity, creativity, and faith.

For those of you who are members of the Church of Jesus Christ (and that could be each of you), wherever you go next, will you please say to your local bishop or branch president, “When the Lord has a calling for me, I would love to serve in our Church.” Where “much is given much is required.”³ It is always timely to give back and give forward—for yourself and for those who expect something more of a BYU graduate in leadership, service, and gospel example.

Among all the things a BYU degree represents, we pray you truly go forth spiritually strengthened and intellectually enlarged, with an individual character committed to “lifelong learning and service.”⁴ Please build with gratitude on a firm BYU foundation.

Fifth, cheers for you graduates who laughed, cried, and grew by serving in your family home evening groups and in your wards and stakes. I hope you will remember with fondness and appreciation this special element of your BYU education. A reason I am proud to be a BYU graduate is that BYU was a formative part of my life’s journey to discover and integrate things spiritual and intellectual. During the week we used those black lab tables to learn chemistry; on Sundays we covered one of those same lab tables with a white cloth so that we could bless the sacrament. I pray that your lifelong seeking of inspiration “in your mind and in your heart, by the Holy Ghost,”⁵ will be fruitful and joyous, including the natural ups and downs that help us progress.

Sixth, on behalf of all of us, may I express gratitude and appreciation to each student, faculty, and staff member who is building on BYU’s firm foundation of bedrock virtues, values, and

principles while learning appropriately when and how to adapt in changing and challenging times.

During these times, many students are developing greater compassion for others. You are discovering the inner strength to adapt and succeed. Faculty are seeking new ways to teach and use new technology, often in stunningly short periods of time. I love watching YouTube examples of BYU professors teaching Italian and Italian cooking; of students taking care packages with handwritten notes to other students quarantined with COVID; and even of (so I heard) fun student bingo nights. You are learning and taking what you are learning to the world.

While achievement, the best-value school, and BYU values speak for themselves, we are proud (in an appropriately modest way) of BYU's many national rankings for student engagement, college worth the cost, best-trained business graduates, Boren scholarships to study abroad, foreign-language degrees, entrepreneurship, technology transfer, accounting programs, and so on and on and on.

We are happy that BYU students are recognized among 2021's most promising multicultural students and that BYU students win first-place juried prizes in some short story writing contests.

Of course, gratitude for a firm foundation means appreciation for those who make opportunity possible and for the continuing humble commitment to seek every opportunity to improve and do better. Please continue to be good so you can do the most good, whatever your circumstance, wherever you are.

So, BYU graduating class of 2021—those who are first generation; who have made on-campus

employment part of education; who have participated in high-impact practices and opportunities; who are building on today for tomorrow; who grew and contributed in family home evening groups and student wards; and who are building on BYU's firm foundation with creativity and fortitude in changing and challenging times—every best wish and congratulations.

You have much for which to be proud in your BYU experiences and accomplishments and much for which to be proud, now, as a graduate of Brigham Young University.

I share my special witness that the firm foundation for which I am most grateful is the restored gospel of Jesus Christ—called in His name The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the members of which across the earth are proud of Brigham Young University and its graduates, including you, the graduating class of 2021, whom we celebrate today. In the sacred and holy name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Laurence Eisenlohr, "Oh, My Aching Baccalaureate," *Post Scripts, Saturday Evening Post* 229, no. 48 (1 June 1957): 36; see also Boyd K. Packer, "What Every Freshman Should Know," *Ensign*, September 1973.

2. Appreciation to Dr. Danny R. Olsen for gathering and providing BYU institutional data and examples as used in the first four graduating student congratulations.

3. D&C 82:3.

4. *The Aims of a BYU Education* (1 March 1995).

5. D&C 8:2.