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Liberty University

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## Pop Quiz: Q&A with Ben Stein

June 01, 2009 | Teresa Dunham

Less than an hour before Ben Stein took the stage as the 2009 Liberty University Commencement speaker, he peered out a high window in the Football Operations Center overlooking Williams Stadium. His biggest worry: “I hope it doesn’t rain.”

The man known for his “Clear Eyes” commercials, monotone delivery of classic lines in “Ferris Bueller’s Day Off” and his game show persona on “Win Ben Stein’s Money” planned on showing a more serious side of himself as guest speaker. His speech would focus on creationism, patriotism and value for humanity. For him, it was refreshing to be in a place where God isn’t used as a curse word.

Stein, 64, had been invited to speak at LU mainly because of his 2008 documentary, “Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed,” that challenges the scientific community’s discrimination against those who believe in intelligent design. He would later tell the audience about the rage he endured when the film went public: “The name-calling was beyond anything I’ve ever seen, and I’ve worked for Richard Nixon, and I’ve been called a lot of names.”

In the meantime, the sneaker-clad celebrity surveyed the clouds and glanced around the crowd gathering outside. Then he settled in for a brief Q&A session with Liberty Journal. Besides complimenting LU on its warm, friendly and intelligent students and staff, Stein praised the organization of the university and said LU’s graduation ran more smoothly than most commencements he’d ever attended. Here are a few of the questions he fielded.

**Q: What is your impression of Liberty University thus far?**

**A:** I wish we had 100 more like it putting out 100 times more graduates. We need people who are more conscious of ethical values and ethical duties and less conscious of making a quick buck. ... We have a shortage of jobs [in America]; we have a shortage of lendable funds; we have a shortage of capable people in the bank industry — but we mostly have a shortage of righteousness. It's like what my mother used to say when people would say to her the real problem in America is junk food. She would say, "The real problem is junk thinking." And you don't have much junk thinking here [at LU]. You have good, healthy thinking here.

**Q: Why did you choose to speak at Liberty's Commencement?**

**A:** Because [Liberty University founder] Jerry Falwell is probably one of the greatest men in the history of the United States. Because he's certainly one of the greatest of the 20th and 21st century. His stands on the right to life, on responsible government — protecting the constitution and protecting the life of the unborn — I believe are a shining beacon of decency, compassion, love and understanding of the human spirit for all eternity. I think he is a man whose name will shine in glory in this country for as long as there is a United States.

**Q: What is the overall message that you hope students will take away from your speech today?**

**A:** That they should be extremely grateful to live in the United States of America. They should be extremely grateful we have a constitution that protects us. I think the main message people take away from me is that there's a lot of anger, a lot of rage against God. There's a lot of rage against people who believe in God. There's a lot of fear on the part of the intellectual establishment in this country, fear directed toward any kind of belief in God ... . The powers that be in this country are not at all friendly to belief in God, and we're going to have to stand up for belief in God if we're going to save ourselves and save this country.

**Q: You've written humor books about "How to Ruin Your Life" and "How to Ruin Your Love Life," but what is your most honest piece of advice for our graduates as they strive toward success in life?**

**A:** Faith in God, belief in moral principles, belief in the principles that Dr. Falwell so well described and practiced in his own life. Belief in personal responsibility and personal discipline, hard work, thrift, enterprise, imagination — those things will get us through.

**Q: Tell me about "Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed," the documentary about creationism versus evolution that you co-wrote and hosted. How has it impacted the culture in positive ways?**

**A:** I'm not sure that it has impacted the culture as much as we had hoped it would, but I think it has reached a lot of people who thought they were alone. What we said was, "Why are people being thrown out of school jobs, university teaching jobs, for saying that maybe there was an intelligent designer who designed life and designed the universe ... when there is no clear evidence that anything else was responsible?" The evolutionists and Darwinists and neo-Darwinists say, "It couldn't have been God; it has to have been evolution; it has to have been random chance acts," but they cannot pin down any mechanism by which life began, cannot pin down any mechanism by which the cell got to be so complicated. In that case, if they don't have any other explanation, why are they so hostile to the idea of a designer? Why won't that even be allowed to be discussed? And, obviously, the reason is that it is not up to a science but a kind of

intellectual dictatorship ... .

**Q: What do you believe has been your greatest blessing in life?**

**A:** Waking up every morning and being in the United States of America — it's a gift beyond words. I can't even describe to you what it's like as a Jew, a person whose ethnic subgroup has been tortured and persecuted all over the world, to wake up in the United States of America with the blessings of freedom and liberty and protection of laws ... . I'd say second after that is my wife, who is a living, breathing saint, and my parents who are wonderful, godly people.

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## **Words of Wisdom from Ben Stein at Commencement**

“It's a wonderful thing to be in a place where you can say the truth, and one of the truths is that in this country you can say any curse word, any swear word, any terrible word you want to say on television. The only words that you cannot say are God and Jesus Christ, and now I'm in a place where you can say that and not have it be a swear word.”

Though Stein is Jewish, he is undeniably proud to live in a Christian nation — and he begs to differ with anyone who says America is not a Christian nation. “If it's not, I'd like to know what kind of a country it is because I don't see any other kind of country that would be as welcoming, kind and generous to its own people and the whole rest of the world as the Christian United States of America, and I'm very, very glad to be in a place where I can say that,” he told the crowd.

Throughout his speech, he sipped Throat Coat tea and displayed some unique improvisational skills. For example, when he spoke about the theory of evolution, he said, “It would be the approximate equivalent of a tornado passing over a junk yard and leaving a fully finished 777 jetliner in an airport right next to it” — and a loud plane simultaneously flew over the Commencement crowd.

A little bug also set Stein up perfectly for part of his speech. He told the audience, “You are not just a dot. You are not just an insect,” as he literally swatted at an insect. “Probably shouldn't have killed that insect,” he joked.

From honor for the military to honor for mothers on Mother's Day weekend, Stein's sentiments also included his favorite Bible verse: “Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost its savour, wherewith shall it be salted? It is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men.” (Matthew 5:13)

*For coverage of Ben Stein's 2009 Liberty University Commencement speech, visit*

[www.liberty.edu/newsarchives](http://www.liberty.edu/newsarchives). Commencement exercises, including his speech, may be viewed at [www.liberty.edu/streaming](http://www.liberty.edu/streaming).