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Abstract

As higher education approaches the twenty-first century, Ted Ward reflects on its future. He names three "horrifying assumptions" that threaten to cripple higher education at the moment of significant influence and sets a four part test, three parts of which higher education must pass. Reprinted from Ted Ward. A Final Exam for Christian Higher Education (Editorial). *Faculty Dialogue*. Fall 1992, Number 18: 5-11.

Now that the decade of the 1990's is well upon us, the business of taking stock and making plans has become an institutional compulsion. If it were not, so there would be even more cause for alarm. Given the rapidity of change in the human condition and the social environment, the need to anticipate the future has never been more urgent. Enlightenment philosophy, wholesale industrialization, and ensuing developments in science and technology have come to a rocky turn. There seems to be no way to assure that brilliant human effort will bring predictably good results.

Pragmatism dominates in political philosophy. Western democracy has outlasted Marxism. Well and good, but after only a fleeting moment of rejoicing it has become frighteningly clear that the frying pan has dumped us into the fire. Raw ethnicity and historical hatred among peoples have returned as the great motivators of war. After the second dozen nations have split themselves into murderous bands of unprincipled racists, we may come to look on the Cold War as "the good old days".

As in most of the post-enlightenment western world, Americans have come to prefer that their wars be fought about ideas and propositional platforms. We have been willing to look past our internal differences and focus the nation on ideological conflicts. But with the end of the Cold War has come a change in the nature of the battleground: ideological conflicts have less appeal as dividers of people. The Los Angeles Civil War of 1992 cannot be explained in terms of conflicting ideologies. Splitting the African-American, Korean-American, and Hispanic-American communities into several warring camps against each other and against the evidently corrupt and ineffectual policing of the body politic may well represent a prototype for the new century. Not a happy thought.

Americans still live their lives somewhat aloof from the worst of the news. How long this can go on depends largely on our capability to deal constructively with the schisms and ethnic tensions within our own country. Sounding the alarm is relatively easy when a nation can see the marauder approaching the walls, but effective mobilization is almost impossible when the enemy is already accepted within the walls and is wearing the disguise of a history that the nation has always preferred to ignore. This next century will bring Charles Dickens' "best of times...the worst of times." How it will unfold depends extensively on the quality of leadership and the integrity of the people. *Here* is the test for Christian higher education. But are we ready? Three horrifying assumptions represent the state of unreadiness for this test:

1. Christian higher education need not be directed toward large-scale issues of human conflict and the quality of life. Its proper purposes are more narrow and personal.

Smallness of vision and smallness of mission are characteristic of a small view of God. Privatizing the Gospel and treating it as “ours,” capturing the good news of salvation as a sort of private property is common today. Likely it results from living a half-hearted Christianity in an age of individualistic materialism.

A vibrant and warmly alive Christianity cannot be so introverted and withdrawn as to stand aloof from the realities of suffering society. But is it reasonable to expect an educational institution to stand for anything more substantial and demanding than the forms of Christianity represented by its rank-and-file students? What about the role of education and educators as leaders and purveyors of truth? Should Christian higher education do less than define and defend a courageous and influential role for the people of God?

We can be warned and challenged by the message to the church of Laodicea, commonly interpreted as a picture of the western world’s church in recent years. The words of disgust are attributed to the “ruler of the creation,” Jesus Christ: “I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth” (Rev. 3:15,16).

2. Christian higher education represents such a small voice; it seems unreasonable to expect much other than maintenance of the network of little “points of light.”

The self-fulfilling prophecy embedded in this assumption is insidious. Whatever happened to “Expect great things from God?” Surely it is not overstepping to assume that God’s preferences would be well-served by a dozen or so “points of light” that found ways to turn up the wattage! Should Christian higher education accept such an impotent and defensive posture? What would happen if a wave of encouragement and confidence in the Holy Spirit of God should sweep across half or more of the Christian colleges and universities? Is it so far from the realm of possibility? With God all things are possible.

An assertive Christian higher education that accepts a leadership position among the structures of society is needed. Given the disarray of public and other institutional education in the United States, clarity of motive and message provides a stronger voice than will ever emerge from defeatism and inhibited caution.

3. Christian higher education is already doing a very effective job of developing people who can relate to the major needs in the world today.

The evidence is strongly to the contrary. A charitable response to this claim is hard to find. From time to time a Christian college or university will undertake a project or institution-wide theme that promises to address the larger social context, but before long the steam goes out of the engine. In several specific cases the news leaks out that the alumni or some other sector of the donor constituency has become uneasy with the school’s emphasis on controversial matters. Will the boldness of the early church ever return to inspire Christian higher education?

Questions about the future of Christian higher education are common within and among the institutions. Few administrators are comfortable revealing outside the hallowed ivy walls the more desperate of the evident conditions, but anxiety has become a poorly guarded secret. The occasional upturns in numbers of applicants and live-warm-body enrollment are heralded with rejoicing; the black-ink

ledgers are displayed with a sense of relief. But behind the closed doors and over the fiber-optic networks the hard work of steering away from impending demise consumes a substantial amount of time.

Christian higher education has come to a crucial moment, writing its way through what may prove to be an ultimate final examination. This proposed test has four parts. Passing any two of the four parts may assure survival for several more years. Passing three of the parts will likely take the institution into the twenty-first century. But only a passing grade on all four parts will satisfy the standards of the circumstances that the next ten years will bring upon us. The conditions are already here and easy to read. We hardly need to learn more about what the year 2000 will bring.

Part 1—Survival. Balancing the budget is a vital task. Few institutions could survive two or three successive years of deficit. Keeping ahead of the expenses is a persistent headache. Many administrators are losing sleep, and faculty must be understanding and helpful if they value their positions. But the survival test goes far beyond the fiscal issues.

As a result of the various forms of expansion which are deemed necessary for survival, Christian higher education is undertaking new and often strange enterprises. How much of what sorts of education can a Christian college, university, or seminary sell to what sorts of audiences for what sorts of reasons before losing, distorting, or at least diluting its mission? The issue is not the selectivity of the audience, but whether the institutional program, goals, and practices are understood and accepted by the institution's support team. The old argument about whether or not all the students must be professing Christians is becoming passé. Nor is the matter of expansions into new content especially problematic except for those few liberal arts fans who are against anything that appears to be too practical.

No, the severe test may come when the college faces the need to expand its faculty by including some who lack evidence of personal Christian faith and walk. Expansion, especially getting into unfamiliar academic territory, suggests compromise, especially in terms of "adjunct" or "temporary" faculty. This sort of compromise may weaken the institution's capacity to reflect and give testimony to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is an incremental, one-way road toward becoming a secular institution.

Part 2—Relationships. A concern for interpersonal relationships and the discipline of those relationships to the Gospel gives evidence of the reality of Christ's presence in an institution. The front edge of the effective Christian is a Christlike openness and compassion for others. If the institution is to represent its efforts in higher education as being Christian this matter must be taken very seriously. In the process of keeping school, even the best of academic content can be heard, learned, and stuffed away for future use with little or no consciousness of how it will come to life in situations which inevitably will include other people. In the name of Jesus Christ, God's very personal incarnation, such abstraction of theory from practice is inexcusable.

Even some of our theological seminaries fall into this perverse trap. Such an institution will define itself as a *school* in order to escape into the relatively easy teaching of content with little or no attention to the development of spirituality or interpersonal relationships.

The test before us demands more: what is the relevancy to the human's relationship to God and to other people? Teaching that fails to comprehend and deal with the basic attributes of human ecology is faulty.

Part 3—Community. The New Testament images of the church express communitarian unity as a major feature. Jesus is still building his church. Higher education carried out in Jesus' name is obliged not

only to be clear about how it relates to this task but also to be about the business of helping young people become socialized into relationships of caring, interdependency, patience, cooperation, and restrained competition. The general society in the western world teaches contrasting values and lifestyle. The world desperately needs to hear the Christian alternatives. In my more optimistic moments I see clues that suggest a willingness to seek help on these matters from any source, even from evangelical Christians, providing that they can put their principles into action.

As business, industry, and government are discovering the importance of *community* in the workplace and the extension of those concerns into family as community, we are enjoying a rather rare moment of acceptance of Christian standards. But do we merely *say* we believe? Are Christian community standards being exemplified in substantial ways? How are they being taught? Are the graduates of the Christian institutions able to live well as community people? God created human society. Competencies in that society are crucial. Does Christian higher education help or hinder? Do we pass the test?

Part 4—Mission. Evangelical Christians put much emphasis on communicating the Gospel of Jesus Christ to those who do not yet believe. Well and good. The tough test comes when the whole of God's message of reconciliation begins to tug at our relationships with people who are different. God's people are sharers in Christ's mission: "...As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you." (John 20:21).

Reconciliation is not a natural habit. It doesn't always feel good when you get involved. It isn't often a good way to make money, although there are some high-priced jobs going begging because there are too few people today who are really good at it. It isn't popular. In sum, reconciliation is a wide open field vocationally, and a much needed matter in this suffering world.

The conclusion of this final exam for Christian higher education deals with the ways in which the institution is providing for effective learning of the skills of "salt and light." It must be more than a slogan, more than an empty promise, more than a fervent hope. To teach people to enter into the ministry of reconciliation is not an option for higher education that calls itself Christian.

A Christian college, university, or seminary should be a place where all participants experience the grace of God through their day-to-day encounters with each other and with the structure of the institution. Further, it must be a place that encourages the habits of a faith-walk in which Christian virtues of character can become a matter of adopted life style:

For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection with love. For if these things are yours and are increasing among you, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Peter 1:5-8)

The verse that immediately follows bears a remarkable similarity to another observation made by the angel about the church of Laodicea, as reported in John's account of the Patmos Revelation: "For anyone who lacks these things is shortsighted and blind, and is forgetful of the cleansing of past sins" (2 Peter 1:9).

The national condition through which well-intentioned people must work their way into the unfolding third millennium of the Christian era demands that we renounce materialism, individualism and self-satisfaction. Christian higher education can become recognized for its relevancy and strength for the difficult days ahead:

For you say, 'I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.' You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked. Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich; and white robes to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen; and salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see. I reprove and discipline those whom I love. Be earnest, therefore, and repent. (Rev. 3:17-19)