



Commonplace or Unique?¹

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We tend to take old friends, old furniture, and old institutions for granted. They are what they are; what they are is pretty much what they always have been. What they *ought* to be doesn't get much attention.

Taking things as they are without serious efforts to make them what they ought to be is a form of neglect. Christian higher education sometimes falls victim; it may have become commonplace. It is easy to take education—even Christian education—for granted. It has been around a good while and it stays about the way we have always known it.

In modern times education is largely taken for granted. Education is concerned with commonplace matters: teaching and learning. In the ordinary course of daily life everyone teaches and everyone learns. For most people the very idea of teaching is related to commonplace occurrences. Learning is what everyone is doing all the time, more or less. Everyone understands, of course, that certain kinds of teaching are handled by schools so that parents can do other things. But schooling, too, is a commonplace matter. Schools are more a fulfillment of the need for efficiency than of specialization; they are not concerned with a peculiar and esoteric function demanding specialized, proprietary, and exotic knowledge. In a variety of ways, the society proclaims that education belongs to everyone. Important, yes, but in the same way that air is important: everybody breathes. What's the big deal?

Not more than two generations ago, colleges—higher education in general—were still held in a degree of mystical respect. They were concerned with more than the commonplace. Professors were the possessors of the magic keys. Then came World War II and the G.I. Bill of Rights; a vast number of young men went into college; many of these went on to graduate school. Higher education was different from then on; it had become accessible to all—at least that was the general impression. What little mystique was left of the “halls of ivy” soon slipped away and higher education, too, became a commonplace in America.

Educational professionals today, professors and administrators alike, share little of the esoteric aura of the less commonplace fields such as medicine or law. The educator is taken for granted while the physician is granted a prestige rooted in the mystique of medicine. Even the automobile mechanic is more likely than the teacher to be seen as a possessor of specialized and unique knowledge. Indeed, when any sort of special status is accorded to a teacher, it is likely to be based on some special or unusual knowledge held by the particular teacher. Relative value of the career role and the social effects of the educator are largely overlooked—taken for granted or largely ignored—as part of the commonplace. Worth to the society has little to do with the authority and honor afforded to a field; what counts is the mystique.

Education is a relatively new field of formal study. Even today there are those who wonder if there is sufficient justification for “education” as an academic major and as a field of scholarly research. (How odd, especially in light of the fact that one of the largest organized groups of research professionals in the world today is the American Educational Research Association.) Investments of funds or of careers in teacher education or in educational research are seen as

¹ Ted Ward. Commonplace or Unique? *Faculty Dialogue*. Fall-Winter, 1986-1987 (7): pp. 1-4. Used with permission.

curious or even irrelevant. The study of learning phenomena and the assessment of learning outcomes lacks the necessary white-coat drama to capture the attention of today's American. Only the gimmicks of learning, computers, "teaching machines," and special events for the "gifted" command much attention in the mass media.

Even the institutions of education—the schools as one set, colleges as another and so forth, have within each set become like interchangeable parts in a big machine. Deciding which one to attend more often comes down to convenience and superficial matters which can be reduced to color photographs in a brochure. This technological society simply wants the skills that will assure economic independence; these are assumed to be widely available. Ironically, the issue at stake is wanting "the good life" without willingness to define it. Pandering to this craving in unregenerate society, much that passes as education today represents a denial that there are any moral costs involved in achieving "the good life."

Considering the hedonistic climate, teachers in general, and college professors in particular, have good reason to feel sorry for themselves. But rather than to risk the consequences of paranoia, the promising alternative is active engagement in the promotion of the values of education. Christian higher education faculty, of all people in education, have the most satisfactory "product" to sell. In the interests of the kingdom in which we claim our primary identity and as honest reflection of the cause to which we have given our professional competencies, we should be outspoken advocates.

Lest our message be hollow, it must be based on a clear image of the values and purposes of the mission of Christian higher education. It is not enough to promote what everyone else promotes: socioeconomic pragmatics of the college degree. Nor is it adequate to join the secular appeal to the superiority of a liberal arts approach to higher education. The effective promoter of Christian higher education must take the time and invest the effort to clarify the very concept of education, itself, in light of Christ-centered values and biblical foundations.

The American society shows signs of recognizing the moral bankruptcy which lies just around the corner if relativism and pragmatism in matters of ethics, morality, and justice are allowed to run their course. The very fact that religious extremists can get large followings and substantial attention in the mass media points to a widely felt awareness that something must be done to head off moral disaster. The answers that extremists offer are rarely worthy solutions to basic human problems—whether in Iran or in the United States. What can the educated Christian offer?

Can we define and effectively "market" the purposes of higher education that we believe in? Can we deliver on the promise to produce people who are both religious and rational? People who are both committed and concerned? People who are both holy and helpful? Both secure and sensitive?

Higher education is indeed a commonplace if all it does is to produce "educated people." That really isn't hard to do, especially if being educated is only a matter of information-gathering, intellectual reasoning, personal goal-setting, and fitting productively into society. What is it that is different about Christian higher education?

The answer cannot simply be that *Christian* higher education adds a spiritual emphasis or perspective to all that the secular mind expects as education. The Christian-perspective-added view concedes the game before the team even gets on the field. The crucial differences between Christian and secular definitions and purposes of education are ignored. Further, such an approach lets mathematics professors and most other teachers of scientific content, exempt themselves if they are of such a mind.

Nor can we simply argue that the essence of Christian higher education is that commonplace education is being provided in an uncommon place—all surrounded by Christian warm-and-fuzzy support systems. There simply must be an honest intellectual wrestling with the fact that every

aspect of the curriculum is different when it starts with the presupposition that God is the Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer of the universe.

Just how different should the curriculum be? The only answer that will hold up is that the purposes, content, context, and resources of Christian higher education must be carefully defined and designed to work together toward the end of a very uncommon sort of education concerned with the deliberate and redemptive interaction of the biblically grounded value system of the kingdom of God and the realities of the social contexts of today's world.

What is Christian higher education? Just how different and in what ways different from the commonplace ideas, images, and values of education? Answering that question exceedingly well and putting the answers to work in full view of the whole society—indeed, the whole world—is the job to be done.