



Faith, Love, Hope—*The Remaining Mission of Christian Higher Education*¹

Ted Ward

“If they could get their act together, what a difference they could make.” A dozen years ago this comment referred to the many who insisted they were turned on to Jesus but turned off to the church. Vigorous personal faith in Jesus Christ then, as always, was seen as lively—in contrast with the alleged deadness of “organized religion.”

Institutionalized Christianity and the institutions of the church became the object of criticism, not just by those who reject the biblical message, but by believers as well. A few changes were made, but in time the pressure eased and things became once again as they had been.

Today it is the institutions of the church, especially her schools and colleges, and theological seminaries to which the earlier comment should be directed: “If they could get their act together, what a difference they could make.” Rather than lonely voices scattered across a desert of darkness, the higher education institutions, especially, are a significant force awaiting mobilization.

The obstacle which seems most evident is the combination of individualism and autonomy which keeps attention focused internally. It is hard to see the possibilities for a more significant social and spiritual contribution while concentrating on the financial and management problems which have become part of each institution’s continuing plight. Survival is high on the daily priorities; it is presumed that competition for students and donations is a legitimate and inescapable part of the institution’s agenda. Getting the act together—if it means significant cooperation and collaborative public visibility—has two strikes against it from the outset: pragmatic competitiveness and traditionalized anxiety over doctrinal compromise.

Whatever case can be made for the legitimacy of these two inhibitions, it pales in the light of the Gospel. The resources and talents concentrated in Christian higher education simply must be displayed more effectively; the Gospel demands it.

Extending the Pauline triad of prime values remains as the core of the mission of the church and of its institutions. In whatever ways its resources and situation permit, Christian higher education is to be pursuing the tasks of 1 Corinthians 13:13:

And now abide in faith, hope, love, these three;
but the greatest of these is love.

Fidelity to the Faith

A time-honored distinctive of Christian higher education is its fidelity to the historical faith. Educational institutions, as most other institutions of society, perform a preserving and conserving

¹ Ted Ward. Faith, Love, Hope—The Remaining Mission of Christian Higher Education. *Faculty Dialogue*. (1) Fall 1984: pp. 1-6. Used with permission. *Faculty Dialogue* ceased publication in 1995.

function; they hold onto the past, hopefully selecting the best continuation as trustworthy foundation for the unknowns of tomorrow.

The function of conserving provides an apt ecology for *conservatism*. The tempting tendency to serve as handmaidens of unquestioned tradition is with us early and late. The Christian institution of higher education best serves its roots as a persistent evaluator of traditions as well as of contemporary society. Its intellectual resources demonstrate faithfulness best through reviewing and renewing the timeless message. The prophetic voice is represented in influences which respond to social realities and thus influence the direction of contemporary culture.

Fidelity to the faith demands of Christian higher education far more than merely passing on the verbal claims of Christianity to one after another cohorts of elite students. What is too easily forgotten is the social role of higher education beyond its classrooms (and sports arenas): the obligation to influence society at large.

Tending to the nurture of the young is the reasonable purpose of primary schooling; but to extend this simplistic purpose upward demeans the career of the professor and the title of the dean. One of the effects of the extending of mass education into what once were called “the university levels” has been the proliferation of alternative forms, and, to some extent, the dilution of the intensity of its purposes.

Of all forms of higher education, the Christian college and university should be most fervently committed to a vision that goes beyond “keeping school.” What is demanded of the institution is that it provide a community of scholarship engaged in reflection and proclamation. The meaning of “professor” is rooted in this sense of community.

Publishing, often seen as an extraneous burden distracting the professor from the “more significant” tasks of teaching, has fallen on bad times. Although all its faculty members and administrators shape the philosophy of a college or university, the willingness to openly share the responsibility and accountability in print is usually left to a handful of philosophy and education professors. Though all faculty and administrators, as Christians, are fulfilling prophetic roles within the institutions, few undertake the means to extend their convictions publically beyond the campus.

Fidelity to the faith implies faithfully teaching, yes, but its broader implication extends to a public impact—directly, not just through the “future generation” of one’s students.

In a time of groping for moral roots and social foundations, the prophetic voice of Christian higher education should be loud and clear—a voice with central concurrence on the basic message of the Gospel and thus competing effectively for the attention and respect of those who led and those who follow in the secular society. To borrow words from the starving lepers who came upon the empty camp of the besieging Syrians (II Kings 7): “It isn’t right to keep all this good news to ourselves.”

People of Love

If the era of the “flower children” taught anything memorable, it was the emptiness of an ungrounded concept of *love*. No matter how it may be well promoted and commemorated, love does not thrive as the subject of a postage stamp or wall poster. Love requires discipline; it must be grounded in basic truth. Love is reflected in emotion, but it is nurtured in hard work.

“Do you love me?”
“You know that I do.”
“Feed my sheep.”

Love is a relationship. It is developed in a community. The principle on-campus task of Christian higher education is to develop communities of love; and it is very hard to do so.

Sound communities grow from the collective quest for righteousness (Lawrence Kohlberg, Harvard, calls it “quest for justice”) and the fulfillment of redemptive processes. Under both of these there must be a responsibility to truth. Of all people, Christians have the most whole truth base; where the institutions of the church tend to fail is in the sharing equitably in the quest for righteousness and in the redemptive process.

Biblical grounds clearly identify *all* as yet under the influences and temporal consequences of sin. The community, therefore, must be constantly questing for ways and means to more fully live in Christlike manner—not as a private and purely internal manner, but as worthy persons relating to other persons of worth.

That there will always be slippage—errors, culpability, ungodliness—requires both just rules and redemptive processes. Christian higher education’s task in producing people of love begins with the involvement of students and faculty within the community processes which reflect, fulfill, and nurture love. Ray Anderson, Fuller Theological Seminary, puts the finger on individualism as the major anti-Christian social value that has invaded North American Christianity. Redemption, as once fulfilled and always fulfilling process, brings all Christians into peer relationship and provides the continuing basis for sound community. It is not the young, alone, who need to learn this relationship and to reflect its consequences through a peaceable life.

In a world groping for justice and peace, the communities formed by campuses for Christian higher education should be exemplary laboratories for the creative application of the principles of the Gospel to contemporary humankind. The secular society today knows little about what such communities are like. What can we show them that will bear testimony to the Lordship of Christ?

Presence of Hope

Paul said that “the greatest of these is love,” but with a world anxious over poised calamities, John Stott’s observation makes sense: The greatest human *need* among these three today is for *hope*.

Ranking scholarship of secular higher education invests hope in a sort of more-of-the-same-is-better philosophy. Few nuances of educational philosophy get beyond the proverbial rearrangement of deckchairs on the *Titanic*. Few new directions for the American or world societies are proposed with any consequent increase in hopefulness. Psychiatrists report that now even children are affected; many assume that they will get no chance to grow up.