



Service: An Endangered Value¹

Ted Ward

The traditional virtue of *Service* has fallen on bad times. Nowadays the employees of the neighborhood “service station” usually expect their customers to pump the gasoline themselves. Trends in dining out are headed in the fast-food direction, with little that can be called “service” in the bargain. The new generation is growing up forgetting that tips were originally a reward for service; in the current economy they are either required or not, depending on the type of establishment more than on the quality of service provided.

Standardization, mechanization, and the tendencies toward a mass society seem inexorably to lead to reduced levels of service. Is there a lesson here for the church and for the institutions which the church supports? If so, it may have arrived too late. By common consent, the church of Jesus Christ uses the word “service” more often to refer to the rather passive exercise of watching, listening, and occasional mumbling which takes place at a weekly fixed hour, commonly at eleven Sunday morning. Is this all that service means among today’s Christians? (“Are you going to the service?” “No, the service has already begun.” “Fine, then we can wait for the next service.”)

No wonder it is so difficult to talk about the mission of Christian higher education in terms of *service*. The basic vocabulary of the Christian community is so confused by the indiscriminate use of the word that one hardly knows what is at stake. Indeed, what is at stake is nothing short of the essence of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In the historical traditions of Christianity, service is outreach, passing blessings along to others, helping, and giving of oneself. Jesus Christ’s self-identification with the Isaiah prophecies of the Messiah as servant of humanity defines the theological high ground for Christian service (Luke 4: 16-21).

Is Service and Option?

Fundamentally, the relationship of education and service is an issue of epistemology. Just what is education? What is learning? When has a person “learned” something? Ultimately, what is knowledge? If learning is taken in the Hellenistic sense as process toward the end of a clarified mind, then *service* can be assumed merely to be the consequent behavior of the adequately informed person. In this perspective, the uses of education to serve humankind and thus to serve God are merely matters for life after schooling.

In the Hebrew perspective, by contrast, the end of learning is obedience—the doing of truth. Considering its Old Testament roots, Christian higher education would seem appropriately to reflect more Hebrew than Hellenistic values; accordingly, the epistemological bias of Christian higher education should value the doing of the Gospel. The implication is that those who benefit from such education are to be “thoroughly equipped” in that they must be informed and skilled in matters dealing with the church’s outreach to the world in ministries of helps and relief. Showing the love of Jesus Christ is a matter of far more than words. This basic value should be protected against being overwhelmed by exclusive preoccupations with given academic disciplines.

¹ Ted Ward. Service: An Endangered Value. *Faculty Dialogue*. (4) Fall 1985: pp. 1-6. Used with permission. *Faculty Dialogue* ceased publication in 1995.

Categories of Service

At least four kinds of service can be fostered by an academic institution:

1. Dialogue with the Society

The most underestimated of all the potential contributions of Christian higher education is its interaction with the larger society—community, state, nation, and world. The contribution of an educational institution to reasoned dialogue is, indeed, one of the historic reasons for higher education. Dialogue requires a setting, and it implies a give-and-take. Thankfully, many Christian colleges are allowing their facilities to be used as a setting for the deliberation of social issues. What is less common is the willingness to serve as host to such discussions and debates without biased and anxious predetermination of the outcomes. At some point, Christian higher education may develop more uniformly a high regard for the power of truth. As it develops, the potential for influencing a wild and erratic society toward reasoned Godliness will increase, and service to the society will become an institutional outcome, not just a consequence of individual voices and actions.

2. Community Participation of the Institution

The “town and gown” relationships are never settled. Every host community sees the college as a mixed blessing. In terms of demands on municipal and civic services, the college can be a liability; in terms of vitality and level of interest in the community, the college is usually a benefit.

Some colleges are aloof, seeming almost to ignore the local community. As a sort of mystical sect, these colleges exhibit a sort of above-it-all loftiness that is irritating and sometimes downright insulting to the local community. It is one thing to be a separated saint; it is quite another thing to be aloof. Would that all Christians in higher education could tell the difference!

The first line of effective Christian testimony of the institution is in the local community. There should never be a question about the level of interest in civic, welfare, and community issues. Faculty members, as individual citizens, and the college, as a corporate member of the local community, can and should be active and involved. From among the faculty and administrators should come members of the school board, the city council, and service clubs.

3. Involvement of the Faculty in Professional Service

Defining the college professor’s role simply in terms of teaching classes omits many of the ancillary activities which make for vitality in the professorial career. Being free to put a certain percentage of one’s time into independent “outside” consultation, lecturing, workshop leadership, and independent scholarly contributions is important. Such activities are constructive and stimulating; they keep the professor involved with “the outside world” beyond the campus and beyond the limited thought world of late adolescents. Perhaps equally important is the example that is provided to students and to society at large: those who can be of help to others are ready and able to serve.

The time may come when faculty contracts will encourage the professor to spend time in professional service. Therein lies one significant measure of the social conscience of the faculty and the significance of the institution.

4. Involvement of the Students in Experiential Learning

Walk-a-thons and rock-a-thons are good news and bad news. On the one hand they suggest the students’ indomitable drive to make a constructive mark on the world in which they live.

Yet they are a sort of make-work evidence that many young people cannot find a practical and direct way to attack social issues and problems. So students resort to substitutional and symbolic events which have no meaning in themselves. While the Christian should be as ready as anyone to demonstrate, when demonstration is the only or the best step to foster responsible action, a Christian higher education should involve the student in far more substantial encounters with practical service. It is part of being educated. Christian praxis depends upon real experiences, not just symbolic gestures.

For many students the field experiences associated with given courses offer a valid avenue for service in the field. The *service corps* activities of the summer months, overseas, in urban communities, in offices and warehouses of welfare agencies, in local churches, for example, often provide the most memorable and life-changing encounters of the whole collegiate experience. What a pity there are so many students who cheat themselves into avoiding such opportunities. Even worse, there are still professors among us who demean such experiences and underrate their educative impact.

Christian Vocation

The controversy between the values of liberal arts and vocational objectives has hurt the cause of Christian higher education. The presumption that “grounding” is separably prevocational has distorted the historic Christian concept of vocation. For the Christian student, heeding the call of God and pursuing appropriate understanding for the fulfilling of that call are central to the educational process. There are no disciplinary taxonomies or academic propositions that can rightly displace this Christ-centered view of vocation. As a consequence of the hangover of pre-reformation distinctions between clergy and laity, there is a different view of *Christian service* for those whose careers are to be sponsored by institutional church agencies and those whose careers are *secular*. Against this confusion, should Christian higher education provide reformational influence by elevating *service* to a higher level of concern for all Christians?

A reasoned argument can be made for emphasis on intellectual matters within higher education to the virtual exclusion of other aspects of a student’s development. In its extreme or exclusive form, this position is untenable on logical grounds. Although the over-commitment of higher education to do anything and everything for students is a valid concern, the student’s collegiate experience is far more than an intellectual encounter. Confusion about the nature of higher education and its goals has weakened the institution and undermined its major potentialities, which are indeed in the realm of thought and reason. Nevertheless, it solves no problems to reject two obvious facts in respect to Christian higher education: first, the validity of the institution rests on its service to the church and the kingdom of God; second, no student leaves behind the other-than-intellectual aspects of personhood in order to enter a classroom.

The overused cliché “whole person” represents an inescapable reality. Social accountability requires an institution to accept responsibility for its net effect upon people, not just the well-intended particulars of its major agenda. Thus when the net effect on the graduate is an acquired tendency toward selfish uses of knowledge and the acquisition of personal power through academic meritocracy, something is very wrong. So let someone else fret about it; we faculty members have classes to meet. We are overloaded, you know.