



To Serve the Church: *Dilemmas of Christian Higher Education*¹

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Dilemmas of Institutional Christian Education (outline from 1973)

1. The orderly community (inside social pressure)
2. The appearance of evil (outside social pressure)
3. The standards of scholarship (intellectual pressure)
4. The motives of materialistic society (worldly pressure)

Dilemmas of Educational Development in Christian Higher Education

1. Practical (materialistic) concerns for survival vs fearless integrity.
2. Specialization vs generalization
3. Activism vs objectivity
4. Vocationalism vs Christian humanism
5. Requirement of behavior vs development of responsible choice
6. Academic individualism vs Christian community

Toward a Future That Can Change the World: The Tasks of Christian Higher Education Today.

1. Identifying and hedging in the forces from within that reduce the Christian-ness of Christian higher education.
2. Enunciating in more concrete terms and practical examples what we are trying to do.
3. Evaluating more openly, more thoroughly, and more deliberately what we are doing that helps and hinders the fulfillment of the intentions of Christian higher education.
4. Seeking and sharing a vision.

Suggested Starting Places

1. Potency/ Christian-ness of Christian higher education
 - a) Abandon the Christian college prayer of thanksgiving (Luke 18:11) and develop a Christian definition of excellence in education: recognize servanthood (Phil 2:5); heed the warnings against detached intellectualism (Matt 23)
 - b) Challenge the creed-without-action and self-seeking forms of the liberal arts philosophy.
 - c) Challenge the compartmentalization that isolates disciplines from each other and from life.
 - d) Discard the self-congratulating that assumes we are doing all that can or should be done.
 - e) Challenge the artificiality of impotent academicism.

¹ Ted Ward. To Serve the Church: Dilemmas of Christian Higher Education. Excerpts from an address to a Christian Higher Education Consultation, Grand Rapids, 1978

2. Enunciating what is being attempted (evaluate and correct)
 - a) Reconsider flowery claims—take intentions seriously
 - b) Study alumni more precisely
 - c) Uphold one another in painful processes of search and reformation.
3. Assessing the liabilities
 - Classical Problems:
 - The “city park”
 - Institutional image
 - Liberal arts fetish
 - Isolation
 - Secular Problems
 - Denial of moral source
 - No common ground
 - Science and technology
 - human responsibility
4. A vision . . .
 - Re-list the problems: Money? Students? Supporters?
 - To come to grips with the really big issues:
 - Authority
 - Human hunger
 - Social responsibility
 - The reality of spiritual being

Here are what I see as six presently apparent dilemmas and two that I see as imminently future dilemmas:

The first of the apparent present dilemmas are the success-and-excellence values. These are alleged to be honoring God. Notice I’m calling this a dilemma. I’m not sure that they aren’t honoring God. But at the same time, they can reflect human pride, and as such, threaten to undermine the Christian’s development. The Scriptures indicate that it is right to have pride in certain things, and not right to have pride in other things. The question then comes down to what sorts of things do we take pride in, and what are our success-and-excellence emblems? Are they matters about which a Christian rightfully has pride? Or are they matters of self-glorification about which a Christian does not have any right to be prideful? That to me is a dilemma.

The second present apparent dilemma is that the liberal arts tradition has served the church fairly well, but it’s pre-Christian secular approaches to knowledge tend today to intensify values which are of special threat to the church, particularly values such as competitiveness and individualism.

The liberal arts tradition is almost the sacred “Touch Me Not” within much of Christian higher education. For example, in Arthur Holmes’ excellent apologetic for the Christian liberal arts tradition entitled *The Idea of a Christian College*, he describes the good side of the liberal arts tradition; but he avoids the other side of the question.

The liberal arts tradition brings along with it some values that are of particular threat to the church today. I speak especially to this issue of competitiveness, this notion of striving, achieving at the expense, ultimately, of others.

The third dilemma is that Christian higher education should not be patterned on higher education in the secular realm. To pattern something of the church deliberately on something of secular origin is to run the risk of bringing in a secular form and inculcating it within the church, including all the baggage and body lice that it may bring in with it. But at the same time, graduates are going to be handicapped if they can't fit neatly into the secular certification, credentialing, graduate education scheme.

We should be careful not to pattern ourselves as miniature copies of what is done in the secular realm. But on the other hand, if we don't, then our students are going to be up against this that or the other kind of discrimination.

Consider the possibility that higher education in general will probably become much more scarce in the next few years. The graduates will be much less in proportion to the whole population. About the time of our 200th anniversary of nationhood (1976), we reached a high point in terms of percentage of Americans being schooled. Since then it's begun to drop away, and I think it will continue to drop away. Because of costs and also because of public confidence in higher education, formal education has become a more scarce commodity.

The fourth dilemma: The teacher-learner relationship in Christian higher education should be patterned on biblical mandates and precedents (acceptance, warmth, giving, love in action, etc.). But in the secular society Christians as well as secular people are conditioned to expect higher education to be in the form of hierarchy, involving social distance, and academic class structure. The notion of "You're all brothers and sisters; you have one teacher" is lost in the shuffle in higher education. It is as if you have rights as a Christian, but somehow you suspend those rights for four years—ironically, while you attend an institution of Christian higher education.

The fifth dilemma: the learner-to-learner relationship (note how the fourth dilemma spoke to the teacher-learner relationship) in Christian higher education should be patterned on biblical mandates and precedents—notions such as sharing, common concerns, non-competitive community in which people share in one another's learning. But the secular society conditions our people to expect to be competitive and have a self-seeking aloofness where learning is a private and lonely experience.

My sixth dilemma: The commitment to broad-based curriculum, as in the liberal arts tradition, is seen to contribute to a flexible background that anticipates God's leading of the student. In other words, we tell the student not to lock himself or herself into a vocational direction. Explore a wide range of studies. A broader base does seem to be God-honoring in providing a broad matrix from which he can lead with greater flexibility. But education today, secular and within the Christian community, tends more and more to demand specialization, especially vocational preparation.

I see this as yet another dilemma. To what extent are vocationalism and functionalism in higher education conducive to flexibility in response to God's leading? We all know the danger of using professional ministry education within the educational institution as the device to replace the church's calling function in reference to the ministry. When calling has to go through the filter of educational competency, if a person hasn't the academic credentials, obviously God can't call him or her, or won't allow a church to call him or her.

Let me talk about two imminent future dilemmas. First, though the biblical concepts of church argue for egalitarian and multi-class or non-class affiliation of people, the fact of rising costs

will tend to make Christian higher education more and more an elitist privilege. And scholarships for the poor don't get to first base.

The second dilemma which I see in the imminent future: Assuming the continuation of trends toward inflation, lowering standards of living, pressure on the private sector from the public sector, the high probability of mounting secular threats to the church, and so on, church reform seems imminent. Yet, at the very moment in history when we are likely to experience, at least in North America, intensive renewal, the leaders needed for that are trapped in institutions that define themselves in terms of preparation. We need a broader-base of commitment to the church, including extension-type activities of all sorts, to get educational resources into the business of renewal and not just preparation.

There is a place for Christian higher education to serve the church by developing appropriate leadership for the church in reference to three facets: to serve the church by developing appropriate leadership for the church in reference to nurturance of the church from within, contribution of the church to the larger, secular society, and outreach of the church in mission and proclamation.

I would urge Christian higher education to get on to these three things. Excellence is ambiguous and is nothing but a hollow echo of a distant secular trumpet. These three are unique to the church of Jesus Christ and they give us a different sense of purpose.

The purpose of Christian higher education is to serve the church uniquely in terms of these three facets of leadership: the facet of leadership for nurturance from within; the facet of contribution of the Christian community as the salt and the light metaphors within the secular society; and leadership in terms of the outreach in mission and proclamation.

One of the saddest realities to me is the number of institutions that are formerly church-serving institutions whose demise as honoring God began with their discounting of that third mission. Thank you. You're very patient to endure all of this. I trust this might be of some value to you as you contemplate your own roles.