



The Idea of a Christian University¹

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To Build a Christian University: the Grand Task

To exalt Christ—through celebrations of creation and participation in redemption.

To fulfill the mission of fostering a Christ-centered world-view.

To elevate *service* above power as a value of the institution, and its participants. The Land Grant University Vision: Service before power—there are those who help, there are those who control.

The Dilemmas (Matters which cry out for reform): Paradoxes and Barriers

Intellectual:

Naturalistic presuppositions (secular control of the disciplines).

Dualistic reasoning—acceptance of a sacred/secular dichotomy

Acceptance of the separation of Church and State

Institutional:

Compartmentalization of knowledge.

Traditions of “school-keeping”

Lack of a model of a self-regulating Christian community.

Barrier Issues:

Academic Freedom

Faculty Autonomy

Style Issues: Inquiry style (society based; oracle based); Decision-making style.

Handicaps for the Christian University (Why it is sure to be a difficult journey toward a Christian university.)

Isolation:

Lack of standing in the intellectual marketplace. Evangelicals tend to disown or ignore those of their number who gain stature in the “secular” arena. It’s only when the “wanderer” comes in from the cold that he or she is embraced.

Tendency to seize on side issues and “nuisance causes” as the focus of Christian scholarship

Imputation of credibility on a basis of narrow orthodoxy.

Publishing for our own market, rather than participating in the larger scholarly arena.

Obsession with our own issues.

Protectionist attitudes about young people.

Conservatism, with a paranoid twist. Not only are we outnumbered, but “they’re out to get us.”

Undesirable Characteristics of Christian Higher Education which may be made even worse by the transition to university ideals.

Elitism

Dualism

¹ Ted Ward. The Idea of a Christian University. Address to a faculty retreat at Biola University, August 17-19, 1988

Conservatism (oligarchical control of the establishment by a few Christian universities.

The Idea of the Christian University: Religious Risks and Pragmatic Puzzles.

Frankly, the idea of a Christian university got off to a bad start. “University” was associated with idiosyncratic ideas related to higher education: Family enterprises; technical schools, one-man bands; lonely crossroads on the prairie and a not well thought out “me-too-ism”. A rearranged organization chart doth not a university make!

Realizing the Christian University

1. It’s sure to be hard
2. But we’ve got to try

The ideal of the Christian University—truly Christian and truly University—has proven to be elusive. The ideals and the difficulties require more of faculty, of students, and of supporters than the traditions of evangelical Christianity have been able to sustain. A reasonable concern exists that becoming a university is a step toward losing Christian identity.

What is needed:

1. A clear vision
2. Spiritual vitality
3. Workable action plans for boards, administration, and faculty.
4. Lots of collegial effort, especially toward faculty development.
5. Ten years in development at a minimum.

Three difficulties in the concept *University* (as in Christian University):

1. The ideals of university are easiest to postulate in the framework of science, especially of empiricism.
2. The wholeness that “university” implies demands substantial breadth, hence largeness.
3. The spirit of inquiry required is threatened by dogma—even by doctrine. (Convergent thinking is less desirable than divergent.)

Three difficulties in the description *Christian* (as in Christian University):

1. Christians in relation to one another are best conceived as families and churches not as schools.
2. For the Christian, intellectual values are not transcendent—they are subordinated to relational and spiritual values.
3. Outcomes of education, for the Christian, must be reclaimed in terms of discipleship (actual behavior as “knowing,” and in service to others).

Three difficulties in our faith communities:

1. Dualism—especially among the more conservative
2. The dis-articulation of Christian fellowships
3. Ambivalence about the worth of disciplined knowledge. (The post-Darwinian period has eroded the formerly strong leadership of orthodox Christians in science, arts, and letters.)

Why I am not sanguine about the prospects. Making the necessary transitions to build a Christian university is . . .

An Obscure Task. Especially when clear models are lacking, social change, especially institutional innovation is profoundly difficult.

An unpopular task. No groundswell of enthusiasm for the changes needed—the passivity of today’s “easy fix” society doesn’t want to be bothered.

A threatening task. Virtually every other institution will see the striving as challenge to their domain. The *de facto* flagships are not apt to take kindly to being upstaged.

- Graduate schools are essentially compartmentalized in vocational terms rather than conceptual and theoretical/foundational terms.
- Theological seminaries are the *de facto* flagships of the fleet, providing images of education, providing leaders for all other Christian higher education. Yet in many respects they are among the slowest to assert creative leadership.
- Christian liberal arts colleges have to integrate “liberal arts versus vocation” issue, or they will divide into two forms: a) elitist—for the new class of wealthy Christians, or b) vocational—for high demand occupations, especially business.
- Bible colleges seem to be on the edge of catastrophe (many seem not willing to hold to the service distinctive. They will divide into a) liberal arts colleges or b) become narrowly focused on the “ministry trades.”

Major concerns about what I see in the *graduate divisions* (professional schools, as for example missions, nursing, psychology, education).

1. *Institutional orphans.* Not clearly related—no established parentage, in many cases, inside or outside the institution.
2. *Enclave mentality.* Not yearning for interaction that will affect other units. Often the opposite: paranoid fortresses.
3. (There are notable exceptions but) *No clear affiliations* with the larger community of specialists in the same field.
4. (With a few exceptions) *Inadequate research*, minimal concern for substantial contributions to the leading edges of literature—“passing on” but not generating ideas.

Major concerns about what I see in *theological seminaries*.

1. Fragmentation.
2. The tendency for some to be *right* all the time!
3. Willingness to settle for very low-level sorts of learning outcomes. (Much is tested at the recall and identification levels. Very little attention to synthesis or evaluation uses of knowledge.) List memorization—“By their tests ye shall know them”
4. Repetitive, non-creative, non-generalizable (or redundant) research.
5. Over confidence in a cognitive approach to spiritual growth and leadership.
6. Commitment to “classical” habituated categories of content (curriculum). Little fresh analysis of the realities of the society in which ministry takes place.

Major concerns about what I see in *Christian Liberal Arts Colleges*.

1. Willing to merely to “keep school.” Many are not much more than post-high-schools.
2. More explicit about uniqueness of liberal arts than about the unique outcomes of Christian education.

3. Ambivalence about vocation/vocationalism—thus confusing the Christian community.
4. Isolation from the academic mainstream (tendency to publish for each other).
5. Unwillingness to push into mainstream issues and to attempt to affect society.
6. Many professors in Christian higher education come through Christian liberal arts colleges. Do they really learn to “get their faith and learning” act together?

Major concerns about the *constituencies* with which we interact (They feed us; we helped to shape them.)

1. Willing to give to things that appear spectacular.
2. In many issues of lifestyle and values, becoming less distinct (following closely the materialism and power-brokering styles of the general society.)
3. Not committed to the reflective values of quality education.

Summary. Major issues raised by the distinction between *college* and *university* (perhaps not fair and too simple, but may help to clarify):

College Implies:

Establishing a foundation. Providing a foundation to do general education—liberal arts.
 Extension of the family’s responsibilities.
 Students as “older children”
 Protection from harm.
 Schooling (patterned leading of learners)
 Preparation.

University implies:

Building sustainable habits. Developing on a broad foundation a vocational—professional career competency.
 A civic community of accountable persons.
 Students as *adults*.
 Exposure to threat.
 Self-directed inquiry.
 Application.

As I grasp the vision, the Christian University would necessarily include:

1. A carefully wrought philosophy of the university, built carefully on theological grounds.
2. An extensive representation of intellectual disciplines.
3. An interactive community of scholars. Par in strengths, peers in style.
4. A deep commitment to inquiry.
 Thus: freedom to be wrong, freedom to ask new questions, freedom to ask old questions as if they might have new answers, freedom to bring differing sources into the dialogue, respect for the question as profound as respect for the answer.
5. Concerted efforts across disciplines to identify and strive toward shared rudiments of a Christian worldview.
6. Students (they’re out there)
7. Money (if God is honored, resources will follow)

Let me start with some convictions:

1. Learning is essentially a social process.
2. Spiritually grounded life skills are the bottom-line for any and all forms of valid education.

3. No formal education is adequately preparational. It cannot do everything. It is at its best in forming sustainable habits. It must be *integrated into a comprehensive plan of lifelong learning*.
4. Wholism demands an operational conception of spirituality. Spiritual development is poorly focused: a) intellectualized to excess, or b) excluded from the major mission.

Let me also offer a few conclusions from a lifetime in formal education:

1. The faculty is key. Yes, management is important; physical resources are important; students are important; the constituency is important; but all of these things rise and fall with the quality and vision of the faculty.
2. The faculty's main tools are two: a) the curriculum, b) their own lifestyle (broadly defined)—relationships with each other, integrity (wholeness, truth commitment, moral discipline), and inquiry.
3. The right questions are every bit as important as the right answers.
4. Promotional images must follow from institutional ideals not attempt to lead them.

Meddlesome remarks about the graduate faculty:

1. A besetting sin (persistent flaw?) of the university—faculty who want to “escape upward”. The result is abandonment of the undergraduates.
2. The university makes sense and coheres only as all faculty contribute to the vitality of the basic undergraduate experience.
3. The gravest threat to quality education comes as the best faculty drift upward. All contracts should specify modes and forms of expected contribution to the basic education curriculum.

Suggestions about the principled form (shape) of the undergraduate curriculum:

1. *A five-year experience.* A world of work experience. Embracing a year for practical life experience. “Older students are better students.” Interim year—before the third academic year, not necessarily “guided.”
2. *An intercultural experience.* Ethnocentrism (cultural narrowness) is a most insidious form of ignorance.
3. *A service experience.* People learn a of life of service by serving. Christian epistemology demands emphasis on *experience*. Life is in the heart and the feet as surely as in the intellect. Integration of “knowing” into “doing” requires experience.

We need to complete the redefine “the basics” from scratch.

1. Phase-out every requirement that is based on traditional categories of curriculum.
2. Ask: What knowledge is essential for effective Christian living in the contemporary world?
3. *Every* academic unit defines its contributions and becomes components of general education only when and if their nominated contributions are seen by the faculty as a whole to have value.
4. I would stop short of establishing and alumni board of curriculum review.

So far, Christian higher education in the 20th century has not come up with a winner. Each of the promising attempts has fallen to the wayside, become weary in its own well doing, or has grown fat in its conceits. You enter a frightening desert. The skeletons of previous explorers are at each side of the trail.