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ACADEMIC DISCIPLESHIP AND THE BAPTIST UNIVERSITY

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Until well into the nineteenth century, the story of American higher education was largely a story about Christian higher education.¹ The Christians who founded the vast majority of the earliest colleges and universities in America were inheritors of a richly Christ-centered educational tradition that had roots in the Patristic era, flowered with the rise of the great medieval universities, and then expanded beyond Europe during the early modern era. In twenty-first-century America, a small minority of colleges and universities maintain a distinctively Christian identity, including my own institution, North Greenville University. Schools like mine are carrying the same torch that was previously borne by many of the greatest thinkers in Christian history and many of the pioneer educators in American history.

North Greenville University is a Baptist institution, one of three educational ministry partners of the South Carolina Baptist Convention along with Anderson University and Charleston Southern University. Like South Carolina Baptists, Baptists in general have long been committed to higher education. In 1720, Baptists in England began educating ministers at Bristol Baptist Academy because Baptists were unable to obtain an education at British universities at that time, all of which had close ties to the Established Church.² A generation later, in 1764, Baptists in New

¹ The best overview of the history of Christian higher education in America is William C. Ringenberg, *The Christian College: A History of Protestant Higher Education in America*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006). The standard history of American higher education in general is John Thelin, *A History of American Higher Education*, 3rd ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019). For the Christian roots of the university, see James Axtell, *Wisdom's Workshop: The Rise of the Modern University* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 1–105.

² The founding date for Bristol Baptist Academy is sometimes given as 1679 because that is the

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England established The College of Rhode Island (later Brown University) in the wake of the New Light revivals, in part so that the anti-establishment Baptists could gain a measure of cultural respectability in a region dominated by the heirs of the Puritans.³ By the 1820s, Baptists in the South were founding educational institutions, including the schools now known as Union University (1823), Furman University (1825), Mississippi College (1826), and Georgetown College (1829). As of this writing, there are over forty colleges and universities affiliated with the International Association of Baptist Colleges and Universities (IABCU), in addition to a handful of Baptist theological seminaries (including Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary).⁴

In this essay, I want to offer a brief vision for academic discipleship for distinctively Baptist universities. While I write primarily with schools like North Greenville University in mind, I believe much of this material is applicable to Bible colleges, theological seminaries, and other Baptist-related institutions of higher education. I use the phrase *academic discipleship* as shorthand for my conviction that Christ-centered higher education is a form of disciple-making. Faculty members are themselves disciples of Christ as well as disciple-makers of their students. The students, in turn, are disciples of their professors, who are forming them to be disciples of Christ within the context of the various disciplines, fields, and professions represented within their university. Part of the calling of Baptist universities, especially within the Southern Baptist tradition, is to put forward a vision of academic discipleship that is informed by core priorities shared by all Christ-centered institutions, yet to frame them within the context of the Baptist identity and distinctives that should characterize our educational institutions.

I. ACADEMIC DISCIPLESHIP⁵

Academic discipleship is distinguished from other forms of discipleship

year that the bequest was given that led to the formation of the school. However, classes were not offered until 1720. See Roger Hayden, "Able and Evangelical Ministers: The Beginnings of Ministerial Formation at Bristol Baptist College," *Baptist Quarterly* 47.3 (2016): 110–11.

³ Thomas S. Kidd, "Becoming Important in the Eye of the Civil Powers: New Light Baptists, Cultural Respectability, and the Founding of the College of Rhode Island," in *The Scholarly Vocation and the Baptist Academy* (ed. Roger A. Ward and David P. Gushee; Macon: Mercer University Press, 2008), 50–67.

⁴ For a list of IABCU member schools, see <https://www.baptistschools.org/member-schools/>.

⁵ My own understanding of academic discipleship has been shaped profoundly by David S. Dockery, *Renewing Minds: Serving Church and Society through Christian Higher Education*, rev. ed. (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2008), as well as Dockery's other writings on the topic.

by two key features. First, the life of the mind plays a central role in the disciple-making process.⁶ Making disciples involves teaching (Matt 28:19–20), so no form of discipleship can happen without the use of the intellect; however, not all forms of discipleship are distinctively *intellectual* like academic discipleship.⁷ Second, this form of discipleship is centered in an educational institution rather than a local congregation or parachurch ministry. The context for academic discipleship is the academy. In the spirit of 2 Corinthians 10:5, students are taught to take captive every thought in every class and subject it all to the lordship of Jesus Christ. As good disciples and disciple-makers, faculty are called to embody the spirit of 1 Corinthians 11:1, inviting students to follow them as they follow the Lord Jesus Christ within their particular areas of expertise. When we focus on academic discipleship, education is understood to be concerned with *formation* more than simply *information*, and the university is understood to be an academic community of disciples that is seeking to obey Christ and advance his kingdom.

This vision of Christian education as academic discipleship is informed by three animating ideas that have influenced Christ-centered education, especially in evangelical traditions.⁸ The first is the importance of a Christian worldview. According to Philip Ryken,

A worldview—or “world-and-life view,” as some people call it—is the structure of understanding that we use to make

In many ways, this essay is an attempt to summarize some of Dockery’s key insights and put them into more intentional dialogue with Baptist identity and distinctives, another topic about which Dockery has written widely.

⁶ For more on the intellectual component of academic discipleship, see Arthur F. Holmes, *All Truth is God’s Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977); Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994); James W. Sire, *Habits of the Mind: Intellectual Life as a Christian Calling* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000); Alister McGrath, *The Passionate Intellect: Christian Faith and the Discipleship of the Mind* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2010); Bradley G. Green, *The Gospel and the Mind: Recovering and Shaping the Intellectual Life* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010); Mark A. Noll, *Jesus Christ and the Life of the Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011); Andreas Köstenberger, *Excellence: The Character of God and the Pursuit of Scholarly Virtue* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011); and Todd C. Ream, Jerry Pattengale, and Christopher J. Devers, eds., *The State of the Evangelical Mind: Reflections on the Past, Prospects for the Future* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2018).

⁷ For this reason, my president and close colleague, Gene Fant, prefers the term *intellectual discipleship* to academic discipleship. We agree we mean the same things by these terms, but we disagree as to which term best captures the intended meaning.

⁸ The remainder of this section closely follows the second section of my forthcoming chapter “Evangelical by Conviction, Baptist by Tradition: David Dockery’s Vision for Southern Baptist Higher Education,” in *Baptists and Culture* (ed. William Pitts; Macon: Mercer University Press, forthcoming).

sense of our world. Our worldview is what we presuppose. It is our way of looking at life, our interpretation of the universe, our orientation to reality.⁹

Worldview language has its origins in nineteenth-century German idealism, and it was imported into Christian circles around the turn of the twentieth century.¹⁰ Theologians such as Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920) and James Orr (1844–1913) first popularized the idea of a Christian worldview, though in the 1970s and 1980s, it was the writings of scholars such as James Sire, Brian Walsh and Richard Middleton, and Albert Wolters that resulted in the promulgation of Christian worldview language in evangelical higher education. Sire, a former English professor and longtime editor for InterVarsity Press, provided a list of basic questions for discerning someone’s worldview.¹¹ Wolters, a Dutch Reformed theologian, offered an influential framework for Christian worldview that is built around the grand narrative of Scripture: creation, fall, and redemption.¹² Walsh, a Reformed theologian, and Middleton, a Wesleyan scholar, contrasted the biblical world with the modern world, attempting to bridge the gap for the sake of faithful cultural engagement.¹³ Building on these thinkers, evangelical scholars also focused on matters such as philosophical foundations for a Christian worldview, the influence of Christian worldview thinking on higher education, and the place of Christian worldview analysis in an increasingly pluralistic context.¹⁴

In recent years, the trend has been in the direction of more expansive accounts of a Christian worldview. I offer two noteworthy examples. First, drawing upon Wolters’s earlier work, missiologist Michael Goheen and

⁹ Philip Graham Ryken, *Christian Worldview: A Student’s Guide*, Reclaiming the Christian Intellectual Tradition (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 19.

¹⁰ For a history of worldview thinking, see David K. Naugle Jr., *Worldview: The History of a Concept* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

¹¹ James Sire, *Naming the Elephant: Worldview as Concept*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2015), 20–21.

¹² Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

¹³ Brian J. Walsh and J. Richard Middleton, *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian World View* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1984).

¹⁴ David S. Dockery and Gregory Alan Thornbury, eds., *Shaping a Christian Worldview: The Foundation of Christian Higher Education* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2002); J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2017); and Tawa J. Anderson, W. Michael Clark, and David K. Naugle, *An Introduction to Christian Worldview: Pursuing God’s Perspective in a Pluralistic World* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2017).

biblical scholar Craig Bartholomew have asked how the disciplines of missional theology and biblical theology might be combined with worldview analysis to help bring cultural renewal to the postmodern West.¹⁵ Second, philosopher James K. A. Smith has argued that we cannot ignore the affective elements of human nature, but must give attention to the heart as much as the head. Smith desires a liturgical and virtue-based understanding of Christian worldview that is more holistic than overly cognitive, philosophical accounts.¹⁶ Despite such ongoing refinements, the language of Christian worldview remains prominent in Christ-centered higher education, and I find it to be helpful (though I personally prefer the term *biblical worldview*). Whether one opts to use the word *worldview* or not, we should all agree that there are distinctively Christian ways of thinking that are shaped by the biblical narrative and basic doctrinal and ethical considerations. Scripture provides us with what Goheen and Bartholomew call “the true story of the whole world,” and our own individual stories—and the stories of every academic discipline, field, and profession—only truly make sense when they are understood in light of that Story of Stories.¹⁷ Academic discipleship involves thinking rightly about God and his world.

The second animating idea that informs academic discipleship is the integration of faith and learning. The conversation about faith-learning integration has roots in Dutch Reformed thought, though, as with the emphasis on Christian worldview, it has been embraced by a variety of evangelical institutions across the theological spectrum. Longtime Wheaton College philosopher Arthur Holmes popularized this terminology in his 1975 book *The Idea of a Christian College*, which has become a modern classic in Christian higher education. Holmes suggested that there are at least four different approaches to the integration of faith and learning, but argued that all of them recognize that “the Christian faith can touch the entire range of life and learning to which a liberal education exposes students.”¹⁸ The reason integration is needed is because of the artificial separation of faith and learning that has accompanied the secularization of

¹⁵ Michael W. Goheen and Craig G. Bartholomew, *Living at the Crossroads: An Introduction to Christian Worldview* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008).

¹⁶ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009).

¹⁷ Michael W. Goheen and Craig G. Bartholomew, *The True Story of the Whole World: Finding Your Place in the Biblical Drama* (Grand Rapids: Faith Alive, 2009).

¹⁸ Arthur F. Holmes, *The Idea of a Christian College*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 45.

higher education, even in schools that began as church-related institutions; this process has been ably (if sometimes controversially) described in the works of George Marsden and James Burtchaell.¹⁹ If Colossians 1:17 is true and all things hold together in Jesus Christ, then the integration of faith and learning is really about putting back together what sinful humans have too often torn asunder.

While not all evangelicals have been enthusiastic about the concept of faith-learning integration, this language has been widely accepted. The Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCCU) sponsors a number of faculty development initiatives to foster the integration of faith and learning, while journals such as *Christian Scholar's Review* and *Christian Higher Education* publish essays regularly on the topic from a variety of perspectives. The more recently formed International Alliance for Christian Education (IACE) is also committed to promoting faith-learning integration.²⁰ In just the past decade, books on this theme have included a guide for new faculty, a handbook-style introduction to the concept, an application of faith-learning integration to matters of pedagogy, and friendly critiques of the model from the vantage point of particular academic disciplines or ecclesial traditions.²¹ As Baptist schools have engaged increasingly with other evangelical institutions, many have found the integration of faith and learning to offer a compelling antidote to the segregation of academic affairs and spiritual matters into two different spheres.²² During the past two academic years, I have had conversations

¹⁹ See George M. Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Unbelief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), and James Tunstead Burtchaell, *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from Their Christian Churches* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

²⁰ The IACE was formed in 2019. The organization's founding president is David S. Dockery, who also serves in a variety of contexts at Southwestern Seminary.

²¹ Patrick Allen and Kenneth Rea Bradley, *Faith and Learning: A Guide for Faculty* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2014); Dockery, *Faith and Learning*; David I. Smith and James K. A. Smith, eds., *Teaching and Christian Practices: Reshaping Faith and Learning* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011); Todd C. Ream, Jerry Pattengale, and David L. Riggs, eds., *Beyond Integration: Inter/Disciplinary Possibilities for the Future of Christian Higher Education* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2012); and Douglas Jacobsen and Rhonda Hustedt Jacobsen, eds., *Scholarship and Christian Faith: Enlarging the Conversation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

²² Baylor University is perhaps the most successful example of the two-sphere approach. See Michael Beatty and Larry Lyon, "Integration, Secularization, and the Two-Spheres View at Religious Colleges: Comparing Baylor University with the University of Notre Dame and Georgetown College," *Christian Scholars Review* 29.1 (1999): 73–112; and Robert Benne, *Quality with Soul: How Six Premier Colleges and Universities Keep Faith with Their Religious Traditions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 112–17.

with faculty leaders at two different Baptist universities that have recognized the need to give greater emphasis to faith-learning integration as part of their faculty development process.

The third component of academic discipleship worth considering is the Christian intellectual tradition, sometimes also called the Great Tradition.²³ The Christian intellectual tradition is the best of the church's biblical, theological, philosophical, and ethical reflection over the past 2,000 years. It represents the broadly shared consensus of Christian thinking as it has developed from the second century to our present era. It is rooted in the Rule of Faith that summarized the grand biblical narrative in the earliest centuries of Christian history. It builds upon the ecumenical creedal consensus of the third and fourth centuries. It has been reflected upon by key thinkers throughout Christian history, and it represents what C. S. Lewis memorably referred to as "mere" Christianity.²⁴ As the late historian Jaroslav Pelikan once observed, "Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. And, I suppose I should add, it is traditionalism that gives tradition such a bad name."²⁵

In a Christ-centered university, the Christian intellectual tradition provides a treasure trove of resources to contribute to academic discipleship within the context of every discipline, field, and profession.²⁶ In C. S. Lewis's outstanding essay "Learning in War-Time," which was revised from a 1939 chapel sermon during World War II, he made the case for why academic disciples need to engage deeply with the Great Tradition:

Most of all, perhaps, we need intimate knowledge of the past. Not that the past has any magic about it, but because we cannot study the future, and yet need something to set against the present, to remind us that the basic assumptions have been quite different in different periods and that much

²³ As best I can tell, the origin of the former phrase is Robert Louis Wilken, "The Christian Intellectual Tradition," *First Things* (June 1991), available online at <https://www.firstthings.com/article/1991/06/the-christian-intellectual-tradition>. Dockery fleshes out the concept of the Christian intellectual tradition in *Renewing Minds*, 52–69.

²⁴ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001).

²⁵ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), 65.

²⁶ One initiative directed at students in evangelical colleges and universities is Crossway's Reclaiming the Christian Intellectual Tradition series, which to date has published thirteen volumes. For the introductory volume that frames the series, see David S. Dockery and Timothy George, *The Great Tradition of Christian Thinking: A Student's Guide* (Reclaiming the Christian Intellectual Tradition; Wheaton: Crossway, 2012).

which seems certain to the uneducated is merely temporary fashion. A man who has lived in many places is not likely to be deceived by the local errors of his native village: the scholar has lived in many times and is therefore in some degree immune from the great cataract of nonsense that pours from the press and the microphone of his own age.²⁷

Those of us who wish to be Christian scholars have an obligation to stand on the shoulders of thinkers who have gone before us by contextualizing our teaching and research within the context of the Great Tradition. In fact, you might think of the Christian intellectual tradition like a great river. Our various disciplines and professions are the boats in which we will travel down the river, and our denominational traditions offer the ramps that serve as our various points of entry. But we want to be on the same river as the church's most influential theologians and the most helpful Christian thinkers in our respective fields. We need to be certain that we are their academic disciples, even as we seek to make academic disciples of the students entrusted to us.

II. BAPTIST IDEAS OF THE UNIVERSITY

So, what about academic discipleship in Baptist universities? Over the years, I have taught courses in Baptist history and identity at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. I often joke with students that you tend to have seventeen opinions wherever two or three Baptists are gathered together. Baptists have always championed freedom in matters of religion. We value freedom of conscience when it comes to one's religious faith and practice; we value the freedom of each congregation to set its own agenda for worship, witness, and service. We value religious freedom for all people, both believers and unbelievers, because it is not the place of the state to coerce individuals' convictions concerning ultimate matters. When Baptists have been at their best, we have argued that our commitment to freedom is not an end unto itself, but is a freedom to obey the commands of Jesus Christ. Freedom is for the sake of Christian faithfulness and human flourishing.²⁸

²⁷ C. S. Lewis, "Learning in War-Time," in *The Weight of Glory: And Other Addresses* (New York: HarperOne, 2001), 58–59.

²⁸ For a brief overview of the historic Baptist emphasis upon freedom, as well as other traditional Baptist distinctives, see Anthony L. Chute, Nathan A. Finn, and Michael A. G. Haykin, *The Baptist Story: From English Sect to Global Movement* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2015),

Unfortunately, Baptists have not always been at our best when it comes to a rightly ordered exercise of spiritual freedom. During the Inerrancy Controversy of the 1980s and 1990s, *freedom* became the watchword of the moderate Baptist vision, where it was sometimes untethered from biblical authority and leveraged in service of aberrant doctrine and revisionist morality.²⁹ But even in our best moments, when we take both the authority of Scripture and the best of our own tradition into account, sincere differences of opinion are common among Baptists. For example, Southern Baptists in the early twenty-first century agree upon biblical inerrancy and basic Baptist identity, but we debate a range of issues that include the number of pastors/elders in a church, how pastoral authority relates to congregational authority, the role of women within a complementarian framework, multisite churches, the doctrine of election, and the relationship between faith and political engagement. There are many other examples.

In light of our emphasis on freedom, it should come as no surprise that there is no such thing as “the” Baptist view of education. In his extensive survey of Baptist higher education in North America, historian William Brackney argues, “There is no one overarching theological principle inherent in the Baptist vision that defines or even suggests why Baptists should engage in higher education.”³⁰ To accentuate this point, Brackney even titles one of his chapters “Baptist *Ideas* of a University”—emphasis on the plural.³¹ Some of the earliest Baptist-related schools in America, notably the College of Rhode Island and Columbian College (later George Washington University) were largely non-sectarian schools that were founded and led by Baptists. Other schools, such as the institutions now known as Colby College, Mercer University, and Samford University, were established as distinctively Baptist literary institutes with a special desire to educate men entering the Baptist ministry. Still other schools, including my current

325–45. For a fuller treatment on religious freedom from a Baptist perspective, see Jason G. Duesing, Malcolm B. Yarnell III, and Thomas White, eds., *First Freedom: The Beginning and End of Religious Liberty*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016).

²⁹ For examples of this perspective, see Alan Neely, ed., *Being Baptist Means Freedom* (Charlotte: Southern Baptist Alliance, 1988), and Walter B. Shurden, *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms* (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 1993). Stan Norman has offered a helpful challenge to the freedom-driven understanding of Baptist identity. See R. Stanton Norman, *More Than Just a Name: Preserving Our Baptist Identity* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2001).

³⁰ William H. Brackney, *Congregation and Campus: North American Baptists in Higher Education* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2008), 417.

³¹ Brackney, *Campus and Culture*, 192–252; emphasis added. This is a clever nod to the Catholic theologian John Henry Newman’s classic nineteenth-century work *The Idea of the University*.

institution, North Greenville University, and my undergraduate alma mater, Brewton-Parker College, originated as Baptist secondary schools that evolved into junior colleges after a generation or so before finally becoming four-years institutions in the late-twentieth century.

Today, the landscape of colleges and universities with present or former ties to the Southern Baptist tradition includes Bible colleges, junior colleges, small liberal arts colleges, prestigious liberal arts universities, comprehensive regional universities, a military academy, and a research university. Within this diversity of institutions, one finds a variety of ecclesial identities. Some schools are literally owned by their respective state conventions, while others are simply historic partners with the Baptists in their state. Some schools adopt detailed confessions of faith that every faculty member affirms, while other schools have no stated doctrinal standard. Some schools identify as theologically conservative, a few as religiously pluralistic, and many as doctrinally centrist. Some schools require every professor to be a Baptist, while most limit the requirement to the President, key administrative leaders, and perhaps professors who teach religion or Christian Studies courses.

Baptist-related schools take the role of spiritual formation very seriously in the life of the university. Most offer some sort of chapel experience, and many require students to attend at least a certain percentage of chapel services. Most are home to Baptist Collegiate Ministry (formerly Baptist Student Union) chapters and other campus ministries that contribute to the spiritual life of students. Many schools have formal discipleship groups, sponsor mission trips and faith-themed study tours, and host lectures, concerts, and other events related to religious themes. Most have some sort of denominational relations office that is tasked with maintaining a good relationship with churches in the region. Campus revivals or spiritual emphasis weeks are still common, though perhaps less so than they used to be. But there is no “one-size-fits-all” approach to cultivating a robust spiritual atmosphere, and many schools at least implicitly segregate spiritual formation from academic affairs. Spiritual life is considered the purview of a particular office, where it can remain detached from what happens inside the classroom.³²

Among schools with ties to the Southern Baptist tradition, many are

³² For a more integrated, holistic vision of campus ministry as part of the larger life of the university, see Todd E. Brady, “Christian Worldview and Campus Ministry,” in *Shaping a Christian Worldview*, 359–76.

affiliated with the aforementioned IABCU, which has provided a venue for Baptist educators to exchange ideas and discuss common concerns. However, over the past generation or so, a growing number of Baptist colleges and universities have also been exposed to insights from other traditions, especially other evangelical groups. Baptist educators have networked with and learned from their counterparts in other Christian institutions through their participation in organizations like the CCCU and, more recently, the IACE. Many academic disciplines enjoy one or more scholarly societies that are intended for Christians working in the field. Examples include the Conference on Faith and History, the American Scientific Affiliation, the Society of Christian Philosophers, and the Christian Business Faculty Association. Through these networks, Baptist-related schools have imported emphases from the wider evangelical world, including the three I mentioned in the previous section, often “baptizing” them into a Baptist educational context.

During this same period, shifts in American culture, especially concerning issues such as the sanctity of human life, human sexuality, and religious liberty, have brought Baptists into closer contact, and sometimes strategic partnership, not just with other evangelicals but with theologically conservative Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Christians.³³ Faculty and administrators at many Baptist schools learn from colleagues at Wheaton College and Taylor University, attend professional conferences with fellow Baptists and other evangelicals who teach at secular institutions, subscribe to periodicals like *First Things* and *Touchstone*, and keep up with the *Chronicle of Higher Education* at least as much—and often much more than—Baptist Press or a state Baptist paper. In many ways, this is a healthy development that should be celebrated. The Baptist tradition has often struggled with sectarianism, so it is encouraging that a growing number of Baptist universities have taken steps to avoid institutional insularity and intellectual inbreeding. Nevertheless, the higher education landscape is littered with schools that used to be Baptist but drifted from their ecclesial roots, more often than not through the process of gradual secularization. David S. Dockery rightly warns Baptist educators to

³³ One such initiative is The Manhattan Declaration, a 2009 document drafted by Southern Baptists Charles Colson and Timothy George and Roman Catholic Robert George. Hundreds of Baptists signed The Manhattan Declaration. A 2019 book celebrating The Manhattan Declaration was co-edited by David Dockery and included contributions from seven additional Baptists. See David S. Dockery and John Stonestreet, eds., *Life, Marriage, and Religious Liberty: What Belongs to God, What Belongs to Caesar* (Nashville: Fidelis Books, 2019).

remain committed to distinctively Baptist higher education, arguing there is a “special responsibility for those colleges and universities who seek to maintain their Baptist identity.”³⁴

III. ACADEMIC DISCIPLESHIP AND THE BAPTIST UNIVERSITY

A little over a century ago, the Southern Baptist theologian and seminary president E. Y. Mullins (1860–1928) wrote *The Axioms of Religion*. The book expounded six principles that Mullins believed characterized the Baptist tradition. Whether one agrees with his axioms or not (I tend to be appreciative-but-critical), scholars agree *The Axioms of Religion* was the most important book on Baptist identity written in the twentieth century.³⁵ Like Mullins, I am both a Southern Baptist theologian and an academic administrator, though my own present context is a Baptist-related university rather than a denominational theological seminary. Nevertheless, in the spirit of Mullins, I offer my own set of axioms related to academic discipleship in the context of a Baptist university. These axioms are rooted in Baptist priorities, but are applied to a college or university context. My goal is not to be exhaustive but to commend these axioms as guiding principles for Baptist educators who are committed to a robust vision of academic discipleship similar to what I described above.

Axiom 1: Jesus Christ is Lord over all things, and Christian faithfulness is about bringing all of life into conformity with Christ’s lordship. Baptists have frequently emphasized the lordship of Jesus Christ. As the English Baptist theologian Steve Holmes argues, “The primary doctrine of the church among Baptists is a stress on the Lordship of Christ.”³⁶ Baptists argue that conversion is the beginning of a lifetime of following Jesus and that baptism marks a believer out as one who has submitted to Jesus’s lordship over his or her life. Jesus is the Lord of every individual church, which is why Baptists champion congregational church polity and local church autonomy. Jesus alone is Lord of all creation, and one day every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that this is true (Phil 2:11).

When we apply this principle of lordship to academic discipleship, it

³⁴ David S. Dockery, *Southern Baptist Consensus and Renewal: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Proposal* (Nashville: B&H, 2008), 136.

³⁵ For an updated edition of Mullins’s book, which includes a scholarly introduction that contextualizes Mullins’s ideas and their reception, see E. Y. Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion* (ed. C. Douglas Weaver; Macon: Mercer University Press, 2010).

³⁶ Stephen R. Holmes, *Baptist Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 101. See also R. Stanton Norman, *The Baptist Way: Distinctives of a Baptist Church* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2005), 33.

provides a theological motivation for thinking Christianly about our various disciplines, fields, and professions, for integrating faith and learning as part of our vocation as teachers and scholars, and for engaging deeply with the Christian intellectual tradition. If Jesus is the Lord of all creation, then that includes the subjects we study and teach. In fact, a key part of our calling as Christian educators is to bring the observable phenomena in our academic worlds into conformity with the spiritual reality that Jesus Christ is Lord. When we do so, we anticipate that day when all things will be made new in Christ. Christian higher education is kingdom work—and Jesus is our King. Students, their parents, trustees, area pastors, and other constituents need to know what it looks like when Christian scholars bow the knee to King Jesus in their vocations as mathematicians and musicologists, biologists and Bible scholars, accounting teachers and art instructors, and early childhood educators and English professors. Baptist universities can lead the way in this kingdom endeavor.

*Axiom 2: Christ reveals his sovereign will through Scripture, which alone is our supreme authority for faith and practice.*³⁷ Like most evangelicals, Baptists are a people of the Book. As such, our universities should be *radically* biblical in their orientation. I am not using this term in its most common contemporary understanding that something is extreme or even fringe. Rather, I am highlighting the older usage of that term, when *radical* spoke to the root (Latin = *radix*), or the foundation, or the basic principle. Scripture should be the root from which the university emerges, the foundation upon which it is built, the basic principle that animates its very life. The values that drive the university's mission and strategic plan should be biblical. Scripture should be the ultimate authority in every academic discipline. This is not a call for what has been called a "narrow bibliocentrism," but rather, it is a commitment to "renewed primary engagement with the actual foundation of Western intellectual culture."³⁸

In a Baptist university, faculty should be equipped to interrogate the presuppositions of their disciplines biblically, something most scholars were never taught to do in secular graduate programs. Foundational general education courses should help all students to think biblically and cultivate

³⁷ The next two paragraphs are adapted from my chapter "Knowing and Loving God: Toward a Theology of Christian Higher Education," in *Christian Higher Education: Faith, Teaching, and Learning in the Evangelical Tradition* (ed. David S. Dockery and Christopher W. Morgan; Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 39–58.

³⁸ David Lyle Jeffrey, "Introduction," in *The Bible and the University*, (ed. David Lyle Jeffrey and C. Stephen Evans; Scripture and Hermeneutics Series 8; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 9.

wisdom and virtues that arise from the Scriptures. Disciplinary courses within each major should intentionally speak to what it means to bring that particular discipline or profession into conformity with Scripture. As Craig Bartholomew argues, “Scripture is our foundational text and infallible authority, and without falling prey to biblicism or dualism, we ought, I think, to find exegesis popping up all over the place in the Christian university.”³⁹ Clinton Arnold agrees when he claims,

A uniquely Christian education is thus profoundly informed by all that we can learn from the Bible. It provides the essential framework for understanding God’s creational design, our place in creation, the phenomenon of evil and its corruption of the world, God’s merciful and benevolent response, how we are to live in a way that is pleasing to God, and God’s plans for the future.⁴⁰

While universities are not Bible colleges or seminaries, the Bible should be the core text that informs every course in the curriculum, even if Scripture is not an assigned textbook for every course.

Axiom 3: All believers are part of Christ’s royal priesthood and are called to and gifted for kingdom ministry, regardless of their particular vocations. Arguably, no single ecclesial tradition has more fervently championed the priesthood of all believers than the Baptists.⁴¹ In Exodus 19:6, the Lord refers to Israel as a “kingdom of priests,” and in 1 Peter 2:9, Peter calls the church a “royal priesthood.” Like the earliest Protestant reformers, Baptists embraced the concept of *vocatio*, or calling, from which we get our English word vocation.⁴² Baptists reject any concept of a special priestly class that is uniquely holy in God’s eyes or mediates salvation to ordinary

³⁹ Craig G. Bartholomew, *Contours of the Kuyperian Tradition: A Systematic Introduction* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2017), 307–08.

⁴⁰ Clinton E. Arnold, “The Role of Biblical Exegesis within the Christian College Curriculum,” in *Where Wisdom May Be Found: The Eternal Purpose of Christian Higher Education* (ed. Edward P. Meadors; Eugene: Pickwick, 2019), 29.

⁴¹ Nathan A. Finn, “Baptist Identity as Reformational Identity,” *Southeastern Theological Review* 8.2 (Fall 2017): 36–40; Timothy George, “The Priesthood of all Believers,” in *The People of God: Essays on the Believer’s Church* (ed. Paul A. Basden and David S. Dockery; Nashville: Broadman, 1991), 85–95; Malcolm B. Yarnell III, “The Priesthood of Believers: Rediscovering the Biblical Doctrine of the Royal Priesthood,” in *Restoring Integrity in Baptist Churches* (ed. Jason G. Duesing, Malcolm B. Yarnell III, and Thomas White; Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2007), 222–45.

⁴² For recent treatment of the doctrine of vocation, see Steven Garber, *Visions of Vocation: Common Grace for the Common Good* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2014).

Christians through the sacraments. In God's common grace, every calling or vocation possesses an inherent dignity and worth; furthermore, every single believer is set apart as an ambassador for Christ and his kingdom. All are called to be ministers of the gospel, though only some are called and gifted to serve as pastors or other so-called vocational ministers. Every believer is called to use his or her spiritual gifts, sanctified natural talents, and acquired skills to proclaim the good news, build up the body of Christ, serve others, and contribute to human flourishing.

Baptist universities should be places where the historic reformational and Baptist doctrine of the priesthood of all believers animates every corner of institutional life—believing students are called to the ministry of the gospel, regardless of why they choose to attend a given institution and their current employment hopes beyond graduation. Part of the calling of a Christian educator is to help each student to identify his or her abilities and to pursue a course of study that will prepare students to glorify God in their various vocations. Think about how this perspective changes the way universities recruit new majors and advise students who are undeclared. As academic disciple-makers, our real goal should not be to grow our respective departments, increase our share of majors, or convince students that what we have to offer is better than what our colleagues across campus are offering. Rather, we should be striving to help align students with majors and programs that prepare them to play their unique parts in Christ's royal priesthood. To say it another way, ministry preparation is not the exclusive purview of a Religion Department or School of Ministry. Every professor in every classroom in every department has a responsibility to form students for gospel ministry within the contexts of their respective areas of expertise and interest.

Every academic discipline and profession constitutes a unique sphere that includes certain knowledge, skills, rules, and expectations therein.⁴³ As educators, we must equip our students to be meaningful participants in those spheres by offering them an excellent education that is suited to the respective identity of each vocation. Each of these spheres is a context for kingdom work.⁴⁴

⁴³ Admittedly, this insight has historically been more closely identified with the Kuyperian Neo-Calvinist tradition than the Baptist tradition. However, there are many points of contact between these two traditions. For a Kuyperian-Baptist reflection upon higher education, see Bruce Riley Ashford, "What Hath Nature to Do with Grace? A Theological Vision for Higher Education," *Southeastern Theological Review* 7.1 (2016): 3–22.

⁴⁴ In recent years, the "faith and work" conversation has offered a renewed vision for a Christ-centered vocational vision for so-called secular professions. Baptist universities would do well

Christian educators in Baptist universities must prepare students to advance the kingdom within the context of those spheres, for the glory of God and the good of others. This emphasis applies to every program: traditional undergraduate, online and hybrid offerings, graduate programs, and even professional development opportunities. Baptist universities are not in the credentialing business, but rather are called to prepare believer-priests to serve God and serve others in a variety of fields and professions.

Axiom 4: The local church is central to God's kingdom purposes, and all believers should be meaningfully committed to a local expression of the wider body of Christ. Most Baptists affirm that the universal church, which includes all believers throughout history, will one day assemble at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb (Rev 19:6–9) and is provisionally embodied among all Christians who are alive at any given time. Nevertheless, Baptists have always argued that the local church is “ground zero” for worship and witness.⁴⁵ The New Testament pattern is for believers to engage with the universal church through involvement in the life of local, contextual expressions of that one body of Christ. Over the past 400 years, Baptists have written hundreds of treatises and thousands of articles about the nature of church membership, discipline, and polity. In our own day, I believe Southern Baptists are experiencing an ecclesiological renaissance as a growing number of churches move toward a more meaningful approach to membership by embracing new strategies such as membership classes and by recovering classical practices such as church covenants and church discipline.⁴⁶

Baptist universities must find ways to more closely partner with local churches, with emphasis on the churches of their sponsoring association or convention, which in most cases comprise the school's most important external constituency. Baptist universities cannot become complacent

to be active participants in that conversation. See Tom Nelson, *Work Matters: Connecting Sunday Worship to Monday Work* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), and Timothy Keller, *Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Your Work to God's Work* (New York: Viking, 2012).

⁴⁵ For recent Baptist accounts of the relationship between the universal church and local churches, see Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church* (Foundations of Evangelical Theology; Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 29–35, 61–64; and John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2019), 25–55.

⁴⁶ In many ways, this recovery has its roots in the writings of James Leo Garrett Jr. (1925–2020), who taught systematic theology at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and other Baptist institutions for over forty years. His shorter works on ecclesiology have recently been collected in James Leo Garrett Jr., *The Collected Writings of James Leo Garrett Jr., 1950–2015*, vol. 3, *Ecclesiology* (ed. Wyman Lewis Richardson; Eugene: Resource, 2019).

and assume the goodwill of area churches is a permanent blessing. Administrators and faculty members also need to cultivate churchmanship—vital, committed, even sacrificial involvement in the life of a local church—and model it for their students. The goal is for every member of the university community to also be meaningfully involved in healthy area churches. Chapel services and campus ministry activities should complement local churches rather than compete with them, even implicitly. Faculty should be encouraged to find ways to use their expertise to partner with local churches to help them accomplish their kingdom agendas. Baptist universities should enjoy a relationship of joyful, servant-minded accountability to the local churches in their regions, with all institutions growing in faithfulness on account of those mutually beneficial relationships.

Axiom 5: The Great Commission is Christ's command to make disciples and extend knowledge of his lordship among all the peoples of the earth. For most of our history, Baptists have been an evangelistic people. In those seasons where we were less so, it was because of alien ideologies that infiltrated Baptist ranks, whether the revisionist liberalism of the theological left or the insular hyper-Calvinism of the theological right. The first foreign missionary from England was the famed Baptist shoe cobbler-turned-pastor William Carey (1761–1834), who spent forty years in India.⁴⁷ In his 1792 missions manifesto, *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens*, Carey made the case that the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18–20 is a binding command upon every generation of believers. Once in India, he shared the gospel, planted churches, translated the Bible into multiple dialects, and founded a Christian university.⁴⁸ Since Carey's time, Baptists have been tireless champions of domestic and global missions. In fact, at its core, the uniquely Baptist form of denominationalism is really cooperation for

⁴⁷ While Carey is often considered the father of the modern missions movement in the English-speaking world, he was not the first Baptist foreign missionary. That distinction belongs to a freed slave named George Liele (1750–1820), who was part of the earliest recorded black Baptist church in our nation near present-day Aiken, South Carolina. In 1783, Liele fled to Jamaica to avoid re-enslavement at the hands of the British army during the American Revolution. While there, he became a prolific evangelist and church planter, starting what became called the Ethiopian Baptist movement in Jamaica among converted British slaves who worked the sugar plantations. See David T. Shannon Sr., Julie Frazier White, and Deborah Bingham Van Broekhoven, eds., *George Liele's Life and Legacy: An Unsung Hero* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2013).

⁴⁸ Timothy George, *Faithful Witness: The Life and Witness of William Carey* (Birmingham: New Hope, 1991).

the sake of missions and other ministries that serve the cause of gospel advance, especially within the Southern Baptist tradition.⁴⁹

I firmly believe that Baptist universities have a special vocation to be Great Commission institutions.⁵⁰ Naturally, this includes offering classes in related fields and providing opportunities for students, faculty, and staff to participate in short-term and mid-term mission trips. But Baptist universities also have the opportunity to implement other strategic initiatives that contribute to God's global advance. In every course, professors should think creatively about global application of the material they are teaching. They should intentionally expose students to voices that do not look like most of them, communicating that we are all global citizens and that the world—and the church—is bigger and more diverse than we often think. Individual departments should develop discipline-specific mission trips and service-learning opportunities that can match the knowledge and skills of their field with specific needs in particular mission contexts, whether in North America or another part of the world.⁵¹ Universities should also be open to considering strategic interdisciplinary majors that combine business, health care, the sciences, and other fields with biblical and missiological studies that prepare graduates to serve in a variety of mission contexts.

The fact is that the number of full-time missionaries who serve primarily as evangelists and church planters is shrinking, but the sky is the limit when it comes to business people, educators, health care professionals, scientists, diplomats, and others working alongside traditional missionaries to win the lost and plant churches in some of the most unreached places in the world. Christ-centered universities are uniquely equipped to form missional professionals in a variety of fields who can be Great Commission partners to traditional missionaries. Baptist universities have the sacred and strategic opportunity to be educational “sending agencies” that are equipping students to proclaim the gospel and contribute to human flourishing in contexts all over the globe.

In closing, my prayer is that Baptist universities would be characterized

⁴⁹ See Nathan A. Finn, “Southern Baptist History: A Great Commission Reading,” in *The Great Commission Resurgence: Fulfilling God's Mandate in Our Time* (ed. Chuck Lawless and Adam W. Greenway; Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010), 51–76.

⁵⁰ See David S. Dockery, *Renewing Minds*, 138–52; Bruce Riley Ashford, “Missions, the Global Church, and Christian Higher Education,” in *Christian Higher Education*, 525–43.

⁵¹ See David N. Entwistle, *The Service Learning Book: Getting Ready, Serving Well, and Coming Back Transformed* (Eugene: Cascade, 2019).

by a vision of academic discipleship that helps students to think Christianly and live missionally, regardless of their program of study. But it cannot be done without intentionality, especially on the part of administrators and faculty leaders. A starting place for Baptist universities is a robust strategy for faculty development that emphasizes a holistic vision for the integration of faith and learning that equips professors to integrate both *their* faith and *the* faith with their respective academic discipline.⁵² This strategy should be animated by the biblical worldview, in conversation with historical Baptist distinctives and the best of the wider Christian intellectual tradition. Even non-Baptist professors should be equipped to own certain “Baptist instincts,” summarized in the aforementioned axioms, which could benefit the wider academic community of disciples. As we have seen, there is no such thing as “the” Baptist view of university education. Yet, surely some Baptist approaches are healthier than others. I hope this essay makes a small contribution to a much-needed conversation about what it means to be a faithful Baptist university in the twenty-first century.



⁵² I reflect upon this theme more in my short essay “The Integration of Faith and Learning: More Than a Prayer,” IACE blog (February 4, 2020), <https://iace.education/blog/the-integration-of-faith-and-learning-more-than-a-prayer>.