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WHAT CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITIES OWE THEIR STUDENTS

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[Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For everything was created by him, in heaven and on earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and by him all things hold together. He is also the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile everything to himself, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.
—Colossians 1:15-20 CSB

There are many who seek knowledge for the sake of knowledge: that is curiosity. There are others who seek to know in order that they may themselves be known: that is vanity. Others seek knowledge in order to sell it: that is dishonorable. But there are some who seek knowledge in order to edify others: that is love.
—Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1113)

Emblazoned on the seal of Union University where I teach is the motto *Religio et Eruditio*. This pithy Latin phrase has served the university well and is helpful shorthand for the mission of integrating faith and learning. Yet, however useful the motto is, Christian universities do not exist for

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faith and learning in the abstract, but for some other reason, or so I want to suggest.

Union's mission statement gets a little closer to the true aim: "Union University provides Christ-centered education that promotes excellence and character development in service to Church and society." But even that mission statement can be understood as *a*-personal. Education is the direct object. To provide Christ-centered education for whom? Learning implies a learner. So, *raison d'être* is for our students and the glory of God. Not *religio et eruditio* in the abstract but, if we need the Latin, *Ad gloriam Dei et alumni*. So, as we think about our life together in a university, one of our central questions must be: "Under God, what do we owe our students?" I argue that it is at least this:

Christian universities owe students a "Greats" liberal arts and sciences Core, offered by master teachers, who integrate vibrant faith, meaningful scholarship, and Christ-like service, in Christian community, forming and cultivating the habits of faithful wisdom, life-long learning, and kingdom living.

Moreover, I further argue that there is no reason for the Christian university to survive if that is not its aim, much less to charge tuition for an educational experience. It is not a large task; it is a monumental one, requiring all of one's self and energy.

Readers can exegete this statement for themselves, but I offer the following to explain and elaborate on a few of the phrases.

I. THE GREATS

The "Greats" points to the curated curriculum. I say curated curriculum because I believe that the faculty members are the curriculum of a Christian university in the formal sense. Their *vitae* (their lives) are the amalgam of embodied knowledge, experience, and wisdom faculty bring to the learning community. Faculty are not a valued addition to the curriculum; they *are* the curriculum. The syllabi and written texts are merely the codification of the requirements of the course of study and the curated literature for that course of study.

However, by "Greats," I do not necessarily mean a classical curriculum (though universities could do worse). I think Christian faculty are perfectly

capable of determining what they think the great texts are as a scholarly community (whether they are persons, schools of thought, or books). In fact, I agree with Stanley Hauerwas of Duke University, who says in his essay on “The Morality of Teaching” that “No issue is more central to the university than whether faculties will find the courage to determine the ‘classics’ that make any curriculum intelligible.”¹ What counts as Greats is a conversation the faculty need to have regularly with one another. What are the core texts to help achieve the mission of the Christian university? What ideas are essential to the curated curriculum? Does the liberal arts core adequately cover those texts? Christian faculty owe it to their students to saturate them in the Greats.

II. MASTER TEACHERS

“Master Teachers” points to the importance of the daily task of the Christian faculty. Faculty must aspire to be a Master Teacher; the liberal arts core must only be taught by such Master Teachers. What is a Master Teacher? That would be determined by the faculty themselves. Baylor University, for instance, formally awards Master Teacher status on the basis of the following criteria:

1. Knowledge and use of effective pedagogies;
2. Advocacy for teaching and learning, as reflected in such characteristics as:
 - a. passion for teaching and learning
 - b. engagement of students—mentoring undergraduates and/or graduates in research, active learning classes, group work, service learning, and/or community-based learning,
 - c. impact beyond nominee’s own courses—e.g. curricular development, mentoring of other faculty colleagues, publications, presentations, or web resources; and
3. Sustained (minimum of 10 years at Baylor) commitment to teaching excellence.

Whether formalized or not, new faculty hires, the faculty development program, and other strategies should aim at producing a congregation of Master Teachers to teach the core and lead the mission of forming students. Christian faculty owe it to their students to be Master Teachers. As Christina Bieber Lake, Clyde S. Kilby Professor of English at Wheaton

¹ Stanley Hauerwas, “The Morality of Teaching,” in *The Academic’s Handbook*, 3rd ed. (ed. A. Leigh DeNeef and C. D. Goodwin; Durham: Duke University Press), 45.

College, puts it, “All of us would do well to remember that teaching is not [just] about imparting knowledge to underlings. It is about inspiring fellow learners to think deeply about a subject that you know can transform them. If it cannot, then why are you teaching it? It’s time to get a different career.”²

III. VIBRANT FAITH

Integration of “vibrant faith, meaningful scholarship, and Christ-like service” implies the incarnation of the faculty’s core values in their embodied practices. Union University identifies her core values as being Excellence-Driven, Christ-Centered, People-Focused, and Future-Directed. Those would be vacuous placeholders if they were not part of the actual practices and aspirations of the individuals who constitute the community of scholars of the university (not to mention of the administration and staff). One of the attractions that brought me to serve at Union was the awareness that these values were not platitudinous window dressing but represented the true aspirations of the community. Christ-centeredness drives the faculty to a vibrant orthodoxy. Being excellence-driven focuses faculty on both pedagogical proficiency and rigorous scholarship. Because faculty are people-focused, they aim to treat students and colleagues in a Christ-like manner and regularly remind one another that teaching and learning are about forming people, including faculty themselves, not about delivering a body of information. Future-directedness requires faculty not only to stay current in their discipline but also to remain cognizant of the fact that their disciples are going into all the world upon graduation, to ply their vocation for the glory of Christ.

While serving for three years as provost and vice president for academic affairs, I had the responsibility of interviewing more than one hundred potential faculty. I rediscovered during the interviews that being a Christian faculty member is not less than acting in a Christ-like manner among students, faculty, and others, but it is also more. Excellence and Christo-centrism at least entail a difference in the way one approaches the assumptions of his or her discipline, how one reframes the questions of the discipline, and how one applies wisdom in its various fields of inquiry. Christian faculty cannot—they must not—embrace uncritically the presuppositions and assumptions of the academic guilds. They must

² Christina Bieber Lake, *The Flourishing Teacher: Vocational Renewal for a Sacred Profession* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2020), 11.

not capitulate to the philosophical naturalism that dominates the academy. A Christ-centered universe is not a naturalistic universe. Christian faculty are not State University X at prayer or just a parochial private school. With due respect to conscientious faculty in both of those contexts, students in Christian universities deserve better than that.

Because our assumptions about both the nature of reality and the anthropology of the learner are different from those of the secular university, our aim must be to reimagine and rehabilitate the disciplines in the light of a distinctly Christian worldview, reconnecting with the Christian intellectual tradition along the way. The fact that we are not regularly having this conversation at a deep level across every campus, in every discipline, is an indication that we may not have yet fully embraced our unique mission as Christian institutions. That is not a criticism as much as a call to action. Faculty in every department of the university must not take their eyes off the question, “What does it mean to think, live, and teach Christianly?” Christian faculty owe it to their students to demonstrate the coherence of Christian wisdom both within and across the disciplines.

IV. MEANINGFUL SCHOLARSHIP

Meaningful scholarship is one aspect of the calling and responsibility of a university. Granted, not every Christian university is a Research 1 institution. Christian faculty, nevertheless, should engage in the ongoing scholarship of life-long learners. Faculty should want to encourage, support, and celebrate those efforts. And although publication is not the only form of scholarship, faculty who publish model the habits of a vocation for their students. They work hard to engage their disciplines, subjects, and research questions, and work doubly hard to articulate their findings to serve the world through publishing those findings. Students are beneficiaries of faculty scholarship either, in some cases, by participating with them in the research and publication or by sensing the joy faculty find in their vocations.

Furthermore, we believe that scholarship takes a variety of forms.³ For instance, some faculty are involved in the scholarship of discovery, whether in the realm of ideas, the creation of art, or the act of empirical science. Others are involved in the scholarship of teaching and learning, asking how

³ For a very helpful model for what this might mean, see Ernest Boyer, *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professorship*, expanded ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2015).

they can serve more effectively as mediators between knowledge/wisdom and their students. Like masters of any craft, faculty take on apprentices. Honing their craft and practicing it well before those who are eager to learn (as well as those who are not) are a great privilege and gift of one's calling. Christian faculty should also encourage, support, and celebrate the scholarship of teaching, finding increasingly effective ways to form the imaginations of their students. Christian faculty owe it to their students to cultivate a community of scholarship.

One of the great privileges that likely brought most of us to teach at a Christian university is, hopefully, the opportunity to practice our craft and live out our vocations in a context in which vibrant Christian belief is not only tolerated, not only welcomed, but woven into our daily experience. Through the great doctrines of the Christian intellectual tradition, the Holy Spirit breathes life into the liturgies of our lives in and out of the classroom. We find we need the Spirit's enablement when we read Toni Morrison just as we need the Spirit's illumination to read the apostle Paul. We need the Spirit's help just as much in interpreting the findings of particle physics as we do when interpreting Hosea. Surely these are the implications of the fact that all truth finds its source in God, that it is the Spirit who leads us into all truth (John 16:13). Of course, this does not mean, thankfully, that truth is not available to the unbeliever. God has vested his world with common grace so that truth may be discerned through multiple means, including the empirical and rational. However, this does mean that Christian teaching and learning should treat every classroom as a sacred space, and every desk, lab bench, and studio should be an altar before the omniscient God of the universe, who is pleased to give wisdom to those who ask and seek (Prov 2).

V. FAITHFUL SERVICE

Christian faculty often speak of the integration of faith, learning, and service. Why? Because they realize that being human is not just about what goes on in the head. Minds are to be subject to the lordship of Christ, and hands and feet should be employed in his service. Faculty are whole persons who try to serve whole persons. The teaching vocation is one of serving as Jesus served through embodied practices. Office hours, for example, provide opportunities for Christian faculty to disciple, nurture, and care for the souls of students as those who will one day give an account (Heb 13:17). Students are precious lambs of God. Faculty have the opportunity

to shepherd their souls, and Christian faculty owe it to their students to be faithful followers of Jesus. Beyond office hours, faculty may serve one another and students in innumerable ways; Christian faculty must teach their students how to serve one another unselfishly and sacrificially.

VI. CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

As image-bearers of God, we are sociable creatures. As sociable creatures in a university context, we are a community of learners. The fact that the Christian university is a *Christian* community means that the congregation of scholars are motivated, shaped, formed, and transformed by the Christian story. Inhabiting that story individually and as a body creates an amazing environment in which students can flourish. From convocation to commencement, Christian faculty give testimony to the academic life being “monastic” in the best sense of the term, as life together in a covenantal community. Christian faculty owe students the experience, benefit, and example of living in a vibrant and healthy community of learning and living.

VII. CONCLUSION

Finally, cultivating the habits of faithful wisdom, life-long learning, and kingdom living points to the *telos* of every Christian, including Christian faculty. I have said to parents on university preview days that the faculty share an important mission with the parents: “that your grandchildren don’t grow up to be stupid and agnostic.” As they thought about that for a minute, I could watch smiles slowly appear on their faces. They got it. Faculty are forming a generation of Christ-followers who will form the next generation of Christ-followers. Christian faculty owe it to their students to do all we can do to help them cultivate these Christian virtues for a lifetime of faithful service to Christ.

“Forming and cultivating habits . . .” is the clue that answers the “how” question. How do Christian universities accomplish all of this? At least one fruitful approach would be to begin with the virtues and practices they want to see embodied in their graduates and reverse engineer the curriculum and co-curriculum to help the community cultivate those virtues together. The great Christian virtues of faith, hope, and love are surely the place to begin. A Christian learning community should nurture the practices of humility (without which there can be no learning), thoughtfulness, integrity, courage, compassion, stewardship, and justice.

Once the virtues have been identified, faculty can begin to think about the practices that will cultivate those virtues and the ways the curriculum, co-curriculum, and experience of life together can help the community of learners become increasingly the kind of people who can be wise, life-long learners, who serve our glorious King faithfully.

While browsing the shelves of the Notre Dame bookstore some time ago, I came across, serendipitously, two never-before-published essays by the estimable twentieth-century thinker Josef Pieper. Delivered in 1950, the title of the essays is *What Does "Academic" Mean? Essays on the Chances of the University*. The introduction to the volume is by the late James V. Schall, the prolific philosopher-priest who taught for many years at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. Setting the stage for reading Pieper's lectures, Schall offers encouragement to Christian faculty:

The proper end of knowledge is truth and the proper end of knowing it is festivity, something that can only be a free response to the joy caused in us when we realize that reality is not a necessity but a gift for us to know, a gift to set us free to rejoice also in what is not ourselves.

The proper end of knowing is festivity . . . so, let the party begin!

