2005

Conceiving the Christian College

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Conceiving the Christian College

Duane Litfin

A Review Essay by David M. Johnstone

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There are multiple times in one's life when a person must evaluate his or her priorities. I believe these occurrences are more frequent for those working with students in higher education. The traditional undergraduate age is one where students often, for the first time, encounter the serious personal implications of faith, calling, relationships and self discipline. Those in student development who are committed to walk beside students will invariably ask these questions of themselves. However, more significant self scrutinizing questions do arise as well. Trauma, crisis and death place the personal debate over core values and foundational assumptions directly in one's face. Beyond the personal wrestling and defining values, an institution and its community members must also take time with these types of questions.

Duane Litfin has helped identify the questions that need to be asked by Christian higher education. In *Conceiving the Christian College*, the president of Wheaton College presents multiple assumptions shared by evangelical and other faith based institutions. He observes that some of the ideas he is bringing to attention are ones that "are so overworked as to be, paradoxically, under-appreciated, under-developed, or even misunderstood" (p. 1). In spite of this failure to appreciate them at a deep level, he asserts that each is "crucial, to the task of Christian higher education" (p. 2). These notions must be dealt with "skill and sophistication" (p. 2) as they are foundational to the Christian educational institute. While Litfin realizes that he is not presenting novel ideas for discussion and that at a certain level these particular ones are overworked, he believes that it is critical for those in Christian higher education to revisit them (p. 2).

Litfin's means of engaging with the reader is to present each chapter in the form of a challenge. These are challenges he is personally dealing with and ones he asserts will be worthy of note for all those involved in Christian higher education. At the beginning of his work, he presents a foundational challenge which he articulates as "To understand more clearly our own identity" (p. 11). He distinguishes between systemic and umbrella institutions, both as faith based, and both worthy of respect, but both being very different. An umbrella institution is defined as one that seeks "to provide a Christian "umbrella" or canopy under which a variety of voices can thrive" (p. 14). While a significant part of the umbrella institution represents the sponsoring Christian tradition, it is also home for a myriad of other perspectives and voices. Litfin further acknowledges that in such a place "some voices may be unhesitatingly secular, others open but searching, while still others may represent competing religious perspectives" (p. 14). It is a community which affirms Christianity, but does not expect all community members to think christianly. While having high regard for these umbrella institutions, he also defines an alternative to this model, in what he calls the systemic institution.

The systemic school is one defined as seeking "to engage any and all ideas from every perspective, but they attempt to do so from a particular intellectual location, that of the sponsoring Christian tradition" (p. 18). Litfin's definition identifies that these institutions are pervasively and systematically permeated with Christian thought. Genuine "Christian thinking will permeate the school's 'academic and student life programs'" (p. 19). This discussion provides the foundation for the rest of the book. Litfin's primary concern for the rest of the volume is the challenges and discussions he brings up as they pertain to systemic institutions.

In chapters entitled "To see more fully who we serve" and "To keep the center at the center," Litfin tackles the slogan [and almost cliché] "Christ centered education" (p. 64). He clearly defines a Christ centered education as being vastly important. He is concerned that the slogan is so familiar that it seldom carries the depth that it once possessed. Litfin observes that it too easily "rolls off our tongues" (p. 36). However, familiarity should not lead to contempt, therefore this idea must be part of the systemic institution's fabric.

He also raises some concern with phrases which have become tired clichés, such as "all truth is God's truth" (p. 99) or "integration of faith and learning" (p. 127). These and others are profound statements that need to be restored at all levels of the college and university. These phrases and distinctives need to be scrutinized, reflected on, and agreed upon by all faculty and administrators. They should be more than platitudes presented to donors and parents in order to recruit more students and increase endowments.

While Litfin is president of Wheaton College, he does not use this book as a means of gratuitously advancing the college's impact on Christian higher education. He uses Wheaton as part of his illustrations, but does not hesitate to use other schools as well to convey his points. The volume is a cohesive unit, yet each chapter could easily stand alone. The target audience seems to be all of those in the academy; however the discussions lean slightly towards the faculty community. While his thoughts are laced with implications and practicality, they also move into the philosophical realm. This more intricate discussion is helpful for those seeking to understand the issues at greater depth; however the many facets of the issues are a challenge for those not prepared to invest time and mental energy. In short, this is a volume that is accessible to all who work in higher education, but it does not limit itself to a shallow discussion of the issues it raises. It provokes both the veteran educator and the novice at the same time.

Personally I appreciated the glimpses I caught of Dr. Litfin himself. His book presented serious issues facing Christian Higher Education. Yet, they were presented in a manner which displayed that he too is still learning even after many years in the academy. I warmed to the fact that he was comfortable that this book was not the end of the discussion.

I believe that this is an important volume to help Christian Higher Education define its identity and purposes. Following in the steps of Arthur Holmes' reflections in *The Idea of the Christian College, Conceiving the Christian College* is gracious in its presentation, but provoking and challenging in its purpose. As Dr. Litfin has written, his "… purpose is not so much to explore the slope as to render it less slippery" (p. 4). This particular comment encapsulates how this volume is shaped. *Soli Deo Gloria.*