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God & Mammon: When Revenue Becomes More Important Than Mission and Community in Higher Education

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When Revenue Becomes More Important Than Mission and Community in Higher Education.

A review essay by David M. Johnstone

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> *No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money. Matthew 6:24*

When searching through the gospels, it is interesting to note that the only topic Jesus talks about more frequently than money is the Kingdom of God. Considering the overwhelming priority of the Kingdom of God in his thoughts, money seems to have a noteworthy place in Jesus' thinking. Jesus had no illusion about the power and significance of money. He was realistic about the importance and significance of money, funds and resources in the lives of people. His discussions focused on the legitimate and illegitimate use of money in the daily lives of his followers. Following Jesus' lead, his modern followers should not be shy about diving into the conversation. Money is rarely a benign force in this world and believers should be active participants in the conversation about the acquisition, loss and ethical use of money.

Looking at the world of higher education, one cannot venture into this discussion without finances being addressed. For those in Christian higher education, being aware of the issues swirling around the field enables us to participate in the conversation with integrity and competence. Failure to become even basically informed relegates the Christian into the backwaters of the exchange. If ignored, these lessons will have to be learned again. In a world that interacts daily with finances, in both beneficial and adversarial ways, this knowledge is critical for decision making.

Reflective of the growing concern and interest on how money has impacted higher education are four volumes published in the last two years. Together these volumes provide a comprehensive introduction to the convoluted world of higher education and its relationship with money.

James Engell and Anthony Dangerfield, Ivy League literature professors, in *Saving Higher Education* center their discussion on those universities who concentrate on the liberal arts and sciences. Further, they highlight those responsible for pioneering the trends adopted by other institutions. They write out of a concern that these universities, which blaze the trail for many others, are losing the focus of their mission. These schools are responding to the perceived needs stated by students who articulate that they want income generating skills and degrees. Ironically, parents and students are overwhelmed "with the message that a college education boosts lifetime income by an average of more than a million dollars, and that the more selective the college attended, the higher the ensuing income" (Engell, 2). In some ways, universities are responding to a need they have generated themselves. The authors acknowledge that traditionally (and currently) it is true that higher education did "produce economically useful knowledge" (8). However, the overt message being sent out from these institutions is that a degree from a particular school will significantly impact a student's future income, and implicit is that income boosting skills should be the primary and best reason to come to a university. Love of learning, altruistic community desires, skills that benefit society become secondary or non-existent; personal wealth becomes the reason to be educated.

Engell and Dangerfield's unease about the focus on money is tied to the erosion of a desire for students to learn, from the observation that educational communities are becoming adversarial and that universities are moving from their missions. They articulate that a liberal arts education is much more than logging classroom time to get a diploma. In responding to the student who pursues education only for "an employment boost," they suggest that this type of individual will only "be narrowly educated. Such a student will discover that the utility promised by occupational education becomes obsolete; whereas, critical thought, skill in communication, and strong powers of analysis never do" (19). While acknowledging the economic benefits of higher education, Engell and Dangerfield also caution students, parents and educators not to lose sight of the much greater intangible values of such instruction.

A baseline reality is that the ability to impart these "intangible values" does take money and resources. The struggle of universities to fund their programs and departments is becoming an increasing challenge. The move to establish private contractual arrangements is deemed to be acceptable and even attractive to many in and out of higher education. While there is a growing sense that the university will become dependent on private funding and enterprise in order to survive, *Saving Higher Education* suggests otherwise:

> *"In reality, private enterprise needs higher education more than higher education needs private enterprise. So it should come as no surprise that private enterprise should try to shape higher education to satisfy its own ends. The shaping influence takes many forms, among them harnessing the research of professors, demanding that students receive certain training advantageous to particular kinds of enterprise, establishing professorial chairs and underwriting research programs, even exploiting students as captive consumers." (17)*

They further demonstrate significant unease over the combative roles which are developing in fragmented campus communities. In pursuit of various funding sources and resources, the community divides "into units, schools, programs, and faculties, each on the lookout for new support, and revenue" (17). The authors lament that when the university ceases to act as "a corporate, spiritual, or intellectual whole," then it more easily falls prey to decisions that compromise its integrity while serving instead the demands of government or business" (17). They indicate a concern that the relationships between the various constituencies of the university community have started to erode because of some of the strategies. Elsewhere, Ream has observed that "the market system has begun to modify the relationship shared by educators and student" (Ream, 69). Some of the strategies to strengthen resources and the financial base of institutions have begun to splinter the academic community.

When the accumulation of wealth and funding becomes of primary importance, the intangible issues of community, character, values and learning "are squeezed out because attention to them hampers the accumulation of money and then money has triumphed as the single end" (11).

David L. Kirp, professor of Public Policy at UC Berkeley, studies in his *Shakespeare, Einstein and the Bottom Line* the difficulties related to the loss of some of those intangibles and related concerns. He also acknowledges the benefits of the partnerships with the public market and scrutinizes strategies for strengthening the financial base of specific universities.

Kirp examined multiple schools and their use of business partners who used marketing tools to enhance institutional strength; as well, he scrutinized the use of contract faculty, or adjuncts which in Kirp's words, "undermines faculty loyalty, undermining its academic culture" (114). He also questioned the trend and wisdom of using consultants to run admissions and recruitment departments (113). Beyond these issues, he outlined the challenges facing universities, such as the University of Southern California which pursues higher national rankings as well as a means of fiscal strength. While in pursuit of its elite status, it began focusing the bulk of resources on departments which were called "peaks of excellence" (117). With this move came "fiscal discipline into the management of the university" (117). A component of this move was to make the individual budgets available for all to see. While the principal of openness was affirmed, in reality the tidiness that exists in business was not present in a university; it became clear that certain departments drew more students and thus more revenue. In short, it meant that some units helped subsidize other units. Unfortunately, this information began to create levels of bitterness, antagonism and protectionism. "At USC, the introduction of the revenue center management unleashed the academic equivalent of a Hobbesian war of all against all. Gone was the commitment to supporting the common good" (118).

Kirp acknowledges the need, and sometimes desperate need, to increase the financial viability of universities and colleges. Unfortunately, some of the initiatives which hope to provide greater funds and resources to assist the academic mission may end up eating away at those very relationships necessary for the fulfillment of that goal. As observed in Engell and Dangerfield's book, some of these endeavors have worked, yet some have only created adversarial relationships between faculty and administrators.

Jennifer Washburn, in *University, Inc,* looks at these adversarial relationships but broadens it to include the tensions that arise between students, administrators and faculty as a result of academic ventures into the corporate world. Washburn observes that Americans have viewed "knowledge as means to other ends, rather than a value in and of itself" (26). With that reality, universities have felt compelled to legitimize and emphasize their usefulness to society (26). This felt need has resulted in the increase of professional programs at traditionally liberal arts colleges, provision of consulting skills to the private sector and generating scientific and technological tools "to spur economic growth" (26). Parallel to this has been a decrease in public sector financial resources for higher education, leading to an increase of energy directed towards the creation of revenue streams for universities and colleges.

The search for revenue and resources to shore up the capabilities, prestige and attraction of institutions has led to multiple strategies, particularly partnerships with the "corporate" world. *University, Inc.* gives attention to academic research, and the development and patenting of new inventions and discoveries. One example was Brown University's David Kern and his discovery of a new lung disease. The attempts to suppress his research resulted from the institutional fear of corporate legal action; as well the tensions between administrators and faculty were magnified by concerns of potential loss of resources and funds due to lawsuits, grants and prestige (76).Washburn explored the concerns about corporate sponsorship of research and facilities, contractual relationships determining who owns the research and the wealth generating world of patent ownership. She especially raises concern in situations where revenue streams clashed with the notions of academic freedom and provision of knowledge for the common good. She identified how turbulent and messy it can become and how far some institutions have strayed from their mission. As a journalist, she stands outside the realm of academia and realizes some relationships with private industry are useful. However, she is concerned that the "commercialization of higher education is undermining the strength and vitality of our nation's universities." (225)

Frank Newman and associates, the authors of *The Future of Higher Education*, continue on this same path, but are more diligent and thorough in exploring all the related issues. As the subtitle of the volume suggests, the authors examine the impact of the market system on higher education. In scrutinizing the "gap between rhetoric and reality (Newman, 1), they identify how competition is presently driving higher education. Whether it is by creating international campuses or increasing accessibility by developing virtual classrooms, the nature of higher education is being transformed. While many hope these changes will make higher education more accessible, governments hope that "competition will slow the rapidly rising cost" (2) of going to college. Unfortunately, rather than this becoming a first step towards institutional reform it has become "a Darwinian thinning of the ranks."(6) Competition has been linked with the drive of state institutions to develop further autonomy. The "market" model of the university system is growing in acceptance; however, its reception has not been with much reflection.

The desire for greater sovereignty is reflected in the pursuit of financial independence. The pursuit of self-determination runs parallel with a need by the state for increased accountability. It is ironic that competition may help universities at a financial level, but the intent of higher education being an investment into the common good is not necessarily being served. This book suggests that: "The concept of a liberal education focused on the student's development and preparation for a life of civic engagement and the life of the mind is in danger of slipping away." (17)

Styles of learning and teaching will change; accessibility and affordability will always be of concern; funding of research and growth of endowments are an ongoing focus for higher education. However, it seems that the spotlight on revenue generation has affected many institutions' perceptions of their original mission. This seems to be the center of the concern. The need and focus on "money" is transforming the purposes and hopes of many institutions with little realization or intentionality.

For evangelical schools that distinguish themselves from other colleges by the preeminence of Jesus in their mission, this should also be a concern. The need for funds and resources, as well as the debates about finances, are not restricted to non-faith based schools. Changes are occurring all over the nation and they are shaping the relationships and characters of many higher education communities. This concern should not be limited to secular schools; evangelical higher education needs to be cognizant of the pitfalls. The particular challenge of finances reminds me of the one Jesus expresses with regards to who establishes the direction and mastery of our personal lives-"God or Money" (Matt 6:24; Luke 16:13). In broadening this conversation to include colleges, the question could be restated by asking who controls and dictates the mission of Christian college or university. Jesus clearly articulates that there is a tension when money vies against God over mastery of the individual. I would suggest that there is also a tension when money vies against God over mastery of an institution.

The challenge to hold money in check is very real. The need for resources for daily maintenance, funds for developing research credibility, ability to market and attract students and the perpetual need to build an endowment are major concerns for the university. Beyond that are the very personal needs to provide competitive compensation to staff and faculty as well as accessibility for current and prospective students. It is complex to adequately respond to these many needs and do this in light of by the university's purpose and mission. This myriad of forces becomes even more confused when personal and institutional reputations get mixed into the discussion. It is easy to forget that Jesus has a place in all of these thoughts; it is easy to forget that he spoke so frequently about money. The volumes reviewed are a significant place to begin understanding the complexities of higher education and its relationship with money. Followers of Jesus will need to bring his teaching into an evaluation of these dynamics.

There is a need to remind ourselves that the mission and purpose of an institution is of fundamental importance in the choice of partners for new programs particularly partners who bankroll programs. Acknowledging that the "ends do not justify the means" is an important value which reinforces place of higher education in our society. When financial partners or ventures undermine a university's mission then those relationships need to be examined closely. Many academic missions include elements of citizenship, character and community. If partnerships force a university to intentionally or inadvertently change, transform or modify their missions then there should be concern.

In developing strategies on change, Engell and Dangerfield suggest that students should be viewed as professional clients rather than consumers (Engell, 49). They distinguish the two by observing that clients participate in the work leading to success; whereas a customer has everything done for them. This shift in the view of students becomes a reminder that a university "should not exist in and for themselves" (8). Unfortunately this truism is frequently forgotten or even ignored by those within and without academia. Engell and Dangerfield's observation about learning is an appropriate way to wrap up this review:

> *Learning is more than its parts. It is not a "brand" or "branding." It is hard to measure or to rank, yet the work it produces is palpable. It is more than the student's job offer, a professor's career, a departmental budget, or a university's reputation. Learning can flourish and grow without any of these, while once that love of learning is extinguished, none of them is based on anything real. When the belief is lost, the university becomes a jumble of things: a patent office, a job fair, a place to advance one's career to stardom, the R&D arm of corporate society. (18)*

For evangelicals this is not a conversation to neglect. As Jesus reflected on money so perceptively and frequently, his disciples should also have credibility when they join the discussion on these issues. As stated earlier these volumes help to provide a broad starting point and introduction to these vast concerns. The greater underlying question to which we return is who should define the ethos and mission of an institution- God or money. *Soli Deo Gloria*

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