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The Christian College: A History of Protestant Higher Education in America

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William C. Ringenberg; *The Christian College: A History of Protestant Higher Education in America* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2006)

A review by Jason M. Morris and Michelle Lessly.

History helps us understand the past, so we are able to forge ahead and make a better future. The book, *The Christian College: A History of Protestant Higher Education in America* by William C. Ringenberg, provides valuable historical insight aimed at aiding the enterprise called Christian higher education. The author has dedicated the book to church-related colleges “...who are earnestly exploring how they might more clearly explain the Christian worldview to their students” (p. 5).

Ringenberg, a professor of History at Taylor University (a Council for Christian Colleges and Universities member institution), joins a host of other higher education historians (Rudolph, 1990; Lucas 1994; and Cohen, 1998) who have skillfully chronicled how the U.S. system of higher education came to be what it is today. Ringenberg adds to the literature on American higher education history by specifically focusing on church-related higher education. He brings a unique lens to the table as one deeply interested in and knowledgeable about this subject. The author’s primary purposes in this work are to “...assist Protestant colleges in increasing their understanding and appreciation of their educational and spiritual heritage and to help fill a void in the historiography of American higher education” (p.13). Ringenberg’s book is an updated and expanded version of what he wrote in 1984; thus making it current and applicable to the present higher education system.

To accomplish his stated purposes, the author utilizes seven chapters that flow chronologically from the colonial period to present day. The author advances his ideals and arguments with a very detailed and well organized account of higher education history. The methodology used by the author appears consistent with similar historical texts. Guest contributor, Dr. Mark Noll, opens the book with an extensive introduction, providing a framework for the chapters that follow by summarizing the intellectual history of Christian higher education. The discussion in this introductory chapter is critical in helping the reader understand the foundational elements of Christian higher education and the ideological forces that shaped and formed these institutions.

Following the introduction, Ringenberg traces the history of higher education in the United States from its beginnings in colonial times to 1900. In these first chapters, Ringenberg’s primary thesis is that the foundational elements of the U.S. system of higher education were *Christian*. He backs this claim with powerful historical evidence, such as the stated purposes of our nation’s earliest institutions. For example, at Harvard the goal of education was “to know God and Jesus which is eternal life (John 17:3), and therefore to lay Christ in the bottom as the only foundation as all sound knowledge and learning” (p. 38). Also, in the early 1700s Yale’s primary goal was that “every student should consider the main end of his study to wit to know God in Jesus Christ and answerably to lead a Godly, sober life” (p. 38).

Another highlight in the first part of this work is the author's explanation of the explosive growth in Protestant higher education that took place in the first half of the nineteenth century. This college founding "boom" occurred primarily because churches felt the need to create institutions of Christian learning for the expanding nation. With few impediments, institutions committed to Christ-centered learning sprang up all across the middle western states. By the 1860s, around 250 institutions of higher education were functioning (Cohen, 1998). Methodist and Baptist institutions led the way because they grew rapidly in church membership during the Second Great Awakening and they realized the importance of having trained clergy (Ringenberg, 2006). This example and many others throughout the first part of this book help the reader understand that Christian ideals in higher education were pervasive in America up until the late 1800s.

Perhaps the most interesting chapter of the book is chapter 4, where the author explores the reasons why many of the institutions that started out with Christianity as the dominant worldview lost their Christian identity. Secularization has been a widely discussed topic in Christian higher education literature. Some of the seminal works that tackle this issue include Burtchaell's *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from Their Christian Churches*, Marsden and Longfield's *The Secularization of the Academy*, and Marsden's *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief*. Ringenberg's historical chapter on secularization complements the major works previously mentioned. Ringenberg cites three primary reasons for what he terms an "ideological revolution": 1) The Bible began to be viewed by intellectuals as a book useful as a source of religious history, wisdom and inspiration, not a work of divinely revealed truth; 2) logical positivism and the scientific method became the established epistemologies; and 3) the belief that universal truths such as those found in the Bible were relative. The idea that individuals create their own meaning and truth became a pervasive philosophy among intellectuals. Ringenberg proceeds in chapter 4 to discuss marks of secularization that often appear in historically Christian universities. Ringenberg boldly states,

The ultimate measure of the extent to which a given college in a given period – past or present – has moved toward secularism is how completely the college personnel still believe that the critical act of history (and thus the key to ultimate meaning and truth in the universe) is the supreme revelation of God to humanity through Christ. (p. 120)

The final part of this book examines the contemporary period of church-related higher education. By including information on the contemporary period, Ringenberg bridges the gap between past and present. This allows the reader to see how advancements

were made in light of secularization and how a solid set of institutions exist that are unabashedly *Christian*. In this section Ringenberg reports that the current state of Christian higher education is flourishing. Current statistics indicate remarkable enrollment growth for CCCU member institutions (67.3%) as compared to all colleges and universities (2.1%) for the 1992-2002 decade. Ringenberg's last chapter points toward reasons for growth, current issues, and possibilities for the future.

This look at the history of the Christian College provides a wide angle that is relevant and necessary to the student development professional today. However, readers may find this book difficult to digest at times. At points the author chooses to sacrifice readability for detail and praxis for historical perspective. This, consequently, may be necessary as many Christian institutions wrestle with identity and level of commitment to Christian ideals. Historical perspectives prove invaluable for informing those charged with policy creation and implementation. Ringenberg's work does accomplish important objectives for student development professionals. Primarily, it familiarizes the practitioner with the larger context of the history of Christian higher education and the dialogue that surrounds its sustainability, as well as future trends.

Ringenberg's work is an important contribution to the body of literature that has been published on Christian higher education. He presents to the reader an honest and comprehensive historical account of Protestant academic institutions in America. His holistic approach to the subject matter makes this work a valuable resource for faculty, staff, and administrators at Christian institutions of higher education. I recommend this read as a timely addition to the growing body of literature on Christian higher education.

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