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What is a Christian College?

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WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN COLLEGE?

H. G. Wells commented that "history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe." Spring Arbor finds itself a contender in that race.

What is a Christian college? If it is Christian, it is a good college; it cannot be Christian and condone either inferiority or mediocrity -- it emphasizes excellence or it should not be dignified with the name Christian. It cannot accept all of the young people of a given denomination just because the churches of that denomination support it with finances. Suitability of students is one of the five major concerns of a Christian college. (It will be discussed later in this paper.) Goals, procedures, teachers, students, and the college image are the focal points of this presentation.

It is easier to move from a two-year college to a four-year program than it is to reduce the number of courses once there has been proliferation. Of course, volume of content is important. To hold otherwise would be like saying that the propositional content of our Christian faith is irrelevant. However, to over-center an educational program on the volume of content to the de-emphasis of whole personal development is like the professing Christian who gives mental assent to the doctrines of Christianity but who finds and demonstrates no faith that is operational.

Stability of Goals

Generally speaking, state tax-supported colleges and universities enroll larger numbers of students than do the independent and church-related institutions. Many of the private schools are completely secular in their philosophy and approach to education, and many that are organizationally church-related have long since lost the vitality and the dynamic of an evangelical interpretation of truth and of a Christian sense of values. Both quantitatively and qualitatively, Christian higher education is left to a small minority of the two thousand colleges and universities of America.

A Christian college is similar to any other college in some important respects,

but is distinctively different in some others. My comments about goals are not in the form of a list of aims as they usually appear in a college catalogue. They are, rather, an attempt to set forth goals in the terms of application and practice.

In the pursuit of truth the Christian college, the Christian teacher, the Christian student are as earnest and as honest in their application to the rigors of study, research and discipline as are those in the largest university. We are seeking the same truth, and we recognize that truth is truth wherever and however it is found.

All truth is God's truth, and the Christian does not fear it - nor is he afraid of where it will lead him. This implies an honest search for truth and decries the tendency toward indoctrination rather than education in many Christian colleges. This was deeply impressed upon me when I began to feel the call to a teaching ministry. My fields of graduate study were philosophy, psychology, and Biblical literature. I thought of some of the problems in these disciplines which may be raised by students -- some that I had wanted to raise and had never been given the opportunity -- and I began to shake in my boots. What would I do? What would I say? How would I answer these questions and problems, should I ever stand -- or sit behind, or on -- the teacher's desk. I went to a man who had taught in Christian colleges for 33 years and, using a sample problem, I said, "What do you do when this question comes up in class?" "Oh," he said, "I just don't let that question come up in class."

Well, that helped -- but not much! I decided that a great deal of dishonesty and open crime was being committed in the classrooms of Christian colleges. Indoctrination is a process in which an active, though not necessarily very vital, teacher transmits his information, interpretations, prejudices, et cetera, to passive students who sit, listen, write down what they hear and attempt to return it in quite the same form on tests and examinations which are graded and the grades converted into credits for the registrar's office and college degrees for the potential alumni. This is to be compared with education, which is an adventure in learning in which an experienced person called the teacher and a group of younger and less experienced persons are involved together in problem-solving activities which call for information,

interpretation, further experience, some trial and error, and the arrival at some conclusions which may become the significant ground for further learning, ignition of interests, achievement of insights, setting of directions -- and all of these toward worthy and fruitful living.

When the first of these more accurately characterizes what is actually going on in the classroom, it is my opinion that this is bad, this is dishonest, this is not Christian -- in fact, this is pagan. Some years ago the Reverend Oliver Hsu, who escaped from Red China and was then working with International Students, appeared on our chapel platform. He very effectively challenged a college audience -- I mean he kept both students and faculty awake for thirty minutes. He referred to his own early training as a member of a Buddhist family. Accompanying his mother to the shrines and the temples, he counted as many as 300 idols during a single day. Confused, he asked his mother, "Who is my God?" His mother, unable to answer the question, took him to the priest where Oliver repeated his question. Then the Buddhist priest said, "That is a question you don't ask -- all of these idols are your gods."

Now, this is indoctrination as opposed to education. Let us look at its results. Oliver was only further confused and thoroughly unsatisfied; in fact, he was completely frustrated. Granted, temporary confusion and frustration are not fatal in the process of education, but it is tragic that the process so often stops here. Oliver Hsu had to get beyond this point in order to be enlightened. He did -- and later became a Christian. So we must get beyond this point in order that we may engage in the free pursuit of truth toward the enlightenment necessary for the preservation and development of our Christian culture.

In its faithfulness to established facts the Christian college has no quarrel with the secular institution. Mathematics, science, history and literature have the same factual basis for every student, and many of the same books, the same laboratory facilities and the same visual aids may be used in all colleges. I suppose an isotope, the anatomy of a cat, or even a philosophical idea are the same on a state campus and on the campus of a church-related college.

In the latter case we have a body of revealed truth to help us interpret and

understand the factual materials. The correlation is a significant aspect of Christian higher education, but the Christian teacher and the Christian student will first of all be true to the facts as they are. They will distinguish facts from hypotheses, and will check both by the norms of the Christian revelation. But they will still be faithful to the facts. In this respect the graduate of a Christian college should be as well-informed as the product of any other.

In its climate the Christian college will be different. There will be a greater respect for personality and for the rights and feelings of others. There ought to be a correspondingly greater degree of consideration, courtesy and friendliness. The social life of the campus is consistent with the norms of the New Testament, and academic life corresponds with the ethics of Christianity.

A Christian college is still a college and not a Sunday school. It should have an air of intellectual sincerity, curiosity and honesty. On every Christian college campus there ought to be a tradition of excellence, the spirit of which is caught by each new freshman class as it enters. The faculty and students must wage a continuous war against mediocrity and half-heartedness. The other day I was studying the credentials of an applicant for a faculty position and I came across a recommendation which struck me very favorably. "Neat and attractive in appearance, forthright and manly in bearing, sympathetic toward real difficulties, yet quick to detect laziness, he won the respect and confidence of his students and colleagues."

In the inculcation and the cultivation of a sense and a set of values the Christian college is different. The standards expressed and implied in the New Testament message were revolutionary when Jesus announced them. They were wholly contrary to the practices of people generally, and even to those of the religious Pharisees. His emphasis upon spiritual values as opposed to material wealth, humility as opposed to pride, service as opposed to being served, and upon love as opposed to selfishness -- these were direct opposites of what they had been emphasizing. So, recognizing this and priding ourselves on our knowledge of the New Testament, we look down our noses at the Pharisees.

But wait! Are His value standards any less revolutionary for us today? To

measure success by how much we can give rather than by how much we can get is still not very popular. To apply the measuring-stick of service rather than salary is not very common, either.

To understand the meaning of goodness, to appreciate the beautiful, to respect the rights and feelings of others, to strive for excellence, and to act nobly and unselfishly in relationships with others -- these are some of the more illusive but important aspects of education that a Christian college can provide. Persons educated for this kind of citizenship can contribute most to the preservation of our Christian heritage and the realization of New Testament goals.

Variability of procedures

Within the framework of stable goals, it is equally important to be able to change and accept change without losing our anchor. One of the most valid criticisms of some colleges is that currently they are doing nothing more or less than they were doing twenty years ago -- and very likely in exactly the same way. This is, of course, fatal to progress in education and detrimental to the intellectual climate of the campus. We must be amenable to change, not for the sake of changing, but because people's needs and problems do not remain the same through the changing periods of our social order.

On the other hand, some have left their moorings entirely and have drifted with the winds and the currents until the catalogue statement of aims is nothing more than printer's ink. In this kind of an atmosphere, students will be as purposeless as the college program is aimless. The Christian liberal arts college recognizes that it is rooted in the Christian classical academic tradition. It fails in the degree to which it permits an uncritical acceptance of the prevailing cultural milieu. But it does permit the free and unhampered search for truth in all areas and aspects of life, and the impartial teaching of any body of knowledge with a well-founded claim to truth. A Christian institution that is not willing to accept these criteria should in all honesty call itself a Bible college, a church school, or some other name that clearly indicates its nature.

In this middle-of-the-road position between deadening rigidity and aimless secularism, there is both opportunity and obligation for a faculty to study, to discover and to employ the best and most effective, even though new and different, means and methods for the involvement of students in the exciting adventures of learning and problem-solving. In this climate, Christianity is viewed not only as a doctrine but even more as a destiny; it is not only believed, it is lived by the faculty and by a majority of the students.

Capability of teachers

Even though the faculty of a Christian college works with dedication and is highly service-motivated, we do not build that faculty by recruiting "missionaries." If there are religious commitment reasons why a teacher should work in a Christian college, those same reasons obligate the college to execute the most respectable salary schedule of which it is capable. But higher salaries alone would not guarantee either better Christians or better teachers.

The teacher whose academic achievement and intellectual vitality guarantee his own continued growth will stimulate his students to discover and exercise their curiosity and creativity. The administrator will seek this kind of teachers within the framework of genuine Christian faith and commitment. His potential is limited to perhaps less than one tenth of available personnel, but this is one of those very difficult tasks at which he must nevertheless succeed if he is to lead a truly Christian college.

The teacher is responsible in the classroom to bring out the best in the personality of each student with intellectual honesty and Christian understanding. He is more a guide and counselor in the learning process than he is a purveyor of factual information. It is better to plant apple seeds than to pass out applesauce. Students should want to go from his classroom to the library and the laboratory to follow up what was initiated by lecture and discussion, question and answer.

But the Christian teacher's responsibility does not end with the classroom. Throughout campus life he is a friend, an example, a listener, a counselor -- but perhaps most of all, an example.

Suitability of students

As I have already intimated, not all good Christian young people are the proper students for any given Christian college. There must be a balance of emphases in the admissions standards as well as in the curriculum offerings of the college. The hopes of dedicated administrators, the efforts of a high-quality faculty, and the adequacy of an expensive plant may all be thwarted and misused if there is no correlation of the student body with the aims and standards that generated the hopes, stimulated the efforts and provided the facilities.

In my opinion, the leadership for our society, our country or our church will not necessarily come from the "upper ten percent" as determined by rank in high school class or by test scores. Accordingly, I would not limit selection to that narrow margin even though there may be enough ten-percenters to populate our colleges. On the other hand, it is useless to admit to our programs those whose inherent abilities and/or previous preparation obviously limit their chance for success in the competition. Reasonable standards, applied and administered by reasonable college officers and committees, must guide and screen the flow of young people into our "halls of ivy." It is an important decision and a matter of serious stewardship to admit a student to a Christian college.

I do not mean to imply that we should exclude those who are not committed Christians at the point of admission. Perhaps a strong majority, however, is necessary if the climate of our college and the main thrust of our influence are to be in keeping with our goals.

Similar balances must be maintained between emphases on general education and degrees of specialization, between liberal education and vocationalism, between commitment to Christ and devotion to study. In all of these areas it is our students who really determine the kind of Christian college we are. And this has implications for admissions, curriculum, counseling and climate.

Image-ability of the college

What is a Christian college? It is a community of scholars, old and young, exploring all areas of human knowledge with the Christian world view as a frame of

reference. Our Taylor president often speaks of our program in the phrase, "twins marks of distinction," referring, of course, to our emphases on academic excellence and spiritual values. Your president has characterized it succinctly in the words, "If the academic and spiritual objectives are uniquely interrelated in a singleness of purpose, the Christian college has found its distinctive. If the academic and spiritual objectives are antagonistically opposed in a conflict of purpose, or if they are passively independent in parallel purposes, the Christian college is confronted with its dilemma." In other words, you don't get a Christian college by running secular classes and conducting prayer meetings and spiritual emphasis weeks on the side.

Much is said these days about the image of the college. And, frankly, the image of the Christian college throughout the educational world is not as good as it should be. The Danforth Foundation has announced an extensive study of church-related colleges and universities in the United States because of a concern for their distinctive function in our secular culture. The announcement, which appeared in the American Council on Education bulletin, Higher Education and National Affairs, included this statement: "By and large, they (the church-sponsored institutions) have not been the acknowledged leaders in efforts to improve the quality of higher education."

Pardon a reference to my own experience and institution. In our catalogue we develop our statement of philosophy around the idea that Christian faith and intellectual achievement are mutually interdependent and meaningful, and that sound education must correlate these in the growing experience of the student. We seek to provide a liberal educational adventure within a Christian community. We have not tried to imitate the large, complex university. We are a small multi-purpose university, attempting to do well a number of things, namely, pre-medicine, pre-engineering, pre-law, pre-theology, pre-nursing, pre-medical technology, pre-business administration, and teacher education. We do all of these in the climate of the liberal arts. We believe we are pioneering for the small Christian college. We are a liberal arts college with pride, and ~~we are~~ ^a College Christian without apology.