Flourishing in the Middle Ground: Christian Higher Education in 2013 and Beyond

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SPIRITUAL AND EDUCATIONAL OCCUPATION

Christian higher education occupies the middle ground in time:

- Seeking to honor the past by fidelity to historic principles and precepts of both Scripture and denominational beliefs
- Seeking to survive and grow in the present with all its operational and strategic realities and demands
- Seeking to both anticipate and position itself for a future of possibilities and problems

The challenge of occupying the "middle" is more than just a time and spatial reference. Christian higher education in 2013 and beyond stands in the "middle" of many competing claims that seek to shape its character and conduct:

- Theological truth claims vs. scientific truth claims
- Biblical lifestyle development among faculty, staff, and students vs. contemporary lifestyles
- Belief in God's provision vs. the need to build revenue sources and fund campus expansion
- Seeking to remain sensitive to denominational beliefs vs. encouraging scholarly freedom to explore ideas
- Desire to teach deep spiritual truth vs. the need to teach the received truths of diverse disciplines
- Balancing the expectations of parents, students, and financial supporters vs. the institutional aspirations of administrators, faculty, and staff

A great challenge of occupying the middle is seeking to be distinctively excellent rather than just satisfactory. The middle ground at times can be characterized as an arena of compromise, of seeking to be non-controversial, and of pleasing everyone partially but serving no one wholly. I would argue that the "middle grounders" can aspire to more than spiritual blandness and educational mediocrity. They can seek to build an institution that stands with conviction at the crossroads of a courageous spiritual identity and a compelling educational aspiration.

REFLECTIONS OF THE CONCERNS OF OTHERS

A variety of writers have raised their voices about the concerns facing Christian higher education. Their perspectives can help us frame the challenges we will face in 2013 and beyond.[1] David D. Schmeltekopf and Dianna M. Vitanza edited a collection of perspectives in *The Future of Baptist Higher Education* in 2006. The titles of the various articles point to issues facing many Christian institutions:

- "Integrating Faith and Learning in an Ecumenical Context"
- "Building on a Shared Identity within a Shared History"
- "Fostering Dissent in the Postmodern Academy"
- "Who Will Our Students Be in a Postmodern, Postdenominational, and Materialistic Age?"
- "Religious Identity, Academic Reputation, and Attracting the Best Faculty and Students"

Schmeltekopy and Vitanza note the challenge of faithful alignment within a denominational framework:

> Baptist colleges and universities, if they are to survive as religiously affiliated institutions, must have a strong sense of identity and commitment to their missions. Establishing such an identity and mission is made more difficult in Baptist life by the fragmented

nature of the denomination. The divisions among moderate, conservative, and fundamentalist Baptist bodies with decidedly different views on theological, biblical, and social issues complicate not only the question of Baptist identity but also the question of sustained support for educational institutions. (Schmeltekopy & Vitanza, 2006)

Within the volume David Dockery describes the challenges faced in "Blending Baptist with Orthodox in the Christian University" in ways that are applicable to Christian education in any setting:

> I believe such a commitment to a theology of Baptist higher education will help us develop a comprehensive and historically informed view of what it means to be a part of the great Christian intellectual tradition as we shape the Christian educational enterprise for this new century. … What we are suggesting will require us to live in tension, reflecting a theological outlook while simultaneously having particular discipline-specific emphases across the curriculum. This living in tension will not entirely please those who see truth as a battle in which it is perfectly clear who stands with the forces of light and darkness. Sometimes the issues with which we wrestle are filled with ambiguities, for at this time, as the Apostle Paul reminds us, even with the help of the Holy Scripture and Christian tradition we are finite humans who still see through a glass darkly. (Dockery, 2006)

In a different but related perspective, Astin, Astin, and Lindholm (2011) discuss the challenges facing both faith-based and secular colleges in *Cultivating the Spirit: How Colleges Can Enhance Student's Inner Lives*. Based on a five-year study of how students change during the college years and the role college plays in facilitating the development of spiritual qualities, the authors argue for the centrality of spiritual development on today's campuses:

> In short, we believe that the findings of this study constitute a powerful argument in support of the proposition that higher education should attend more to student's spiritual development. Assisting more students to grow spiritually will help create a new generation of young adults who are more caring, more globally aware, and more committed to social justice than previous generations and who are able to employ greater equanimity in responding to the many stresses and tensions of our rapidly changing technological society. (Astin, Astein, & Lindholm, 2011)

Astin, Astein, and Lindholm understand the challenge of integrating faith and scholarly pursuits:
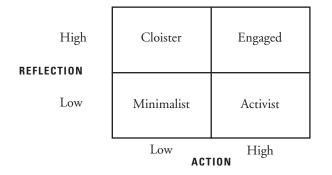
> Envisioning campus communities in which the life of the mind and the life of the spirit are mutually celebrated, supported, and sustained necessitates that those of us within higher education reconsider our ways of being and doing. We must be open to broadening our existing frames of reference and willing to look closely not just at what we do (or do not do) on a daily basis, but why. (Astin, Astein, & Lindholm, 2011)

Arthur Chickering has been a long recognized advocate for helping students' spiritual and moral development. Writing with Jon C. Dalton and Lisa Stamm in *Encouraging Authenticity and Spirituality in Higher Education* (2006), the authors urge educators to consider the development of spiritually sensitive campuses:

> The important point is that academia has for too long encouraged us to lead fragmented and inauthentic lives in which we act either as if we were not spiritual beings or as if our spiritual side were irrelevant to our vocation or work. Under these conditions, our work becomes divorced from our most deeply held values, and we hesitate to discuss issues of meaning, purpose, authenticity, and wholeness with our colleagues. At the same time, we likewise discourage our students from engaging these same issues among themselves and with us, though many of us personally and privately engage in reflection about these concerns. (Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2006)

Looking ahead, Chickering, Dalton, and Stamm frame the challenge for all higher education institutions:

> The current debate on many campuses about the place of spiritual growth, values, and moral purposes is focusing considerable attention on what is genuinely valued in higher education. Many are persuaded that the important roles of helping students integrate learning with values and spiritual growth has been excluded from much of today's higher education. We expect to see an increasing number of colleges and universities become engaged in reassessing how they measure up in promoting spiritual growth, authenticity, and moral purpose in the education and development of their students. (Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2006)

In an article appearing in *Direction Journal* (a Mennonite publication), Merrill Ewert discusses the twin challenges of Christian education: theological reflection and community outreach. He proposes a two-by-two matrix for re-examining Christian institutions based on the extent to which they foster reflection on their underlying faith-claims, and the extent to which they engage their culture in uniquely Christian ways on the basis of those core values (Ewert, 2007).

	Low	High
High	Cloister	Engaged
REFLECTION		
Low	Minimalist	Activist

Low   High

ACTION

- **Minimalist institutions** "maintain the pretense of being Christian but fail to engage their students in examining their core faith commitments. Nor do they reach out in service in ways that explicitly reflect their founding values" (p. 80). Such institutions may have public faith claims, but these are historical artifacts rather than actively current guiding principles for institutional decisions and actions.
- **Cloister institutions** seek to provide students a place to reflect deeply on their faith beliefs but do so in conjunction with purposefully limited engagement with the "world." "They have focused their attention primarily on promoting right belief, celebrating core values, and maintaining their religious and cultural identities" (p. 81). They believe that many contemporary universities are lethal syntheses of postmodernism, cultural relativism, and political correctness and seek to maintain purity of belief through a separationist mentality.
- **Activist institutions** are very active in outreach and service but not particularly reflective about the Christian beliefs that motivate these efforts. While offering mission trips and community outreach programs, little time is devoted to sustained and critical review of the faith claims that might underwrite their outreach.
- **Engaged institutions** are both introspective (what do we believe and why) and externally engaged (given what we believe, how do we translate those beliefs into action). They seek a synthesis of Word and deed, of reflection and action, of being and doing (Ewert, 2007).

Ewert accurately notes the challenges to Christian higher education in today's environment:

> Higher education in North America stands at a crossroad. Society has become more urban, stratified, and culturally diverse; students who enroll in college today are more poorly prepared than their parents' generation and more pessimistic about the future. The world is post-Christian, globalized, and fragmented as social, economic, political, religious, and ethnic cleavages widen. (Ewert, 2007)

In a March, 2012 article in *Christianity Today*, Perry Lanzer discusses what he calls "The Missing Factor in Higher Education" (Glanzer, 2012). His contention is that the missing factor in many secular education institutions is the development of moral wisdom. He depicts the challenge clearly:

> Christian colleges and universities can celebrate their distinctive moral contributions. But they must also ask how they can continue to avoid the flight from [moral] wisdom to [technical] expertise taken by secular universities. The temptations are many. Financial and peer pressure to attract a greater variety of students, particularly through barebones online degree programs, entice Christian universities to abandon their theological and moral distinctives or to gear curricula toward building professional qualifications. The desire to bolster one's academic standing may lead administrators and faculty to downplay an institution's Christian identity when hiring. And the personal failures and struggles of faculty members may discourage them from moving beyond barrow forms of professional training. (Glanzer, 2012)

In a February, 2002 article from *SBC Life*, Michael Duduit discussed his view of the many challenges facing Christian higher education:

> There is a secularized environment that pervades most university campuses today – including many that understand their "religious heritage" to be an uncomfortable piece of history rather than a living reality. Those who lead the academy from their outposts in major universities have set out to "deconstruct" truth so that the very notion is sapped of its meaning. The search for truth has been replaced by a glorification of "tolerance" as the preeminent virtue; all "lifestyle options" (heterosexuality, homosexuality,

premarital promiscuity) are considered "value neutral" on today's "enlightened" campuses. (Duduit, accessed 2013)

A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE:
CHALLENGES FOR 2013 AND BEYOND

The following observations reflect my experience as a professor/administrator in mostly Christian higher education since 1976, as well as the reading I do in connection with the future of higher education as director of institutional research and assessment at two different Christian universities.[2]

Seeking to deliver a real, sustainable and sellable value proposition will be increasingly challenging. The challenges will come from:

1. **The decreased understanding and valuing of the nature and importance of biblical integration in professional education**. This I call the triumph of vocational preparation and certification over education that transforms the life of students.

2. **The increased importance of comfort, convenience, and cost in educational choices made by both students and their parents**. Many Christian colleges simply cannot compete with the state and large private schools in offering the amenities that many students expect.

3. **The increased reliance on technology (particularly employed in distance education contexts) resulting in the loss of human context.** Education becomes viewed more similar to a purchasable product than a consuming pursuit.

4. **An increasingly shallow view of the difference between wisdom, knowledge, and information.** We live in an information age, where our lives are awash in a stream of social media from phones that are increasingly stages for multimedia presentations as much as "talking." While information rich (what is going on), we are knowledge impoverished (how do the multi "what's" connect together). We suffer even more greatly from a lack of wisdom — the ability to apply knowledge in ways that reflect God's will and ways. Both students and faculty decreasingly appreciate the difference between knowing something deeply and knowing about something superficially.

5. **Increased focus by students on edutainment.** Many students seem to view college as a placed to be entertained and catered to 24/7. This in part is fed by assess-

ment systems that emphasize student satisfaction over student challenge and student entertainment over student enrichment.

6. **The movement of education from a craft/cottage model to an industrial model**. For many years, education involved the transmission of scholarly and moral reasoning to selected students through faculty mentors. College was a place where character was developed through close contact with faculty — college was a privilege, not an expectation or even a right. There has been a move to an industrial model where all students are expected to have access to a college degree and where faculty are often forced to assume the role of "talking heads" standing before classrooms of 60 and more students. The industrial model is driven by many forces: technology, market demand, cost consciousness, and accreditation to name a few. Whatever the forces, the result is too often seeing education as a commodity rather than craftwork.

7. **The growth of technological capabilities far beyond faculty capabilities to utilize it.** Especially because of distance education pursuits, faculty are seen as partners in educational development, not as owners. Faculty decisions can be modified and even overruled by professional educational technology experts. Courses are increasingly seen as delivery mechanisms rather than development mechanisms. Technology fosters the unsubstantiated belief that the means of educational delivery have little connection with the ends achievable through those means.

ENDNOTES

[1] This short review is meant to sample the wide variety of literature reflecting on the future of Christian higher education. It is not inclusive of all the ongoing dialogue in the literature.

[2] The books and articles I have cited in this paper offer their own extensive bibliographies for projections of the future of Christian higher education. My observations are instructive, not exhaustive. The language used in my articulation reflects my work in teaching strategic management and organizational change and leadership.

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