

# THE CENTRALITY OF CHRIST AND CHRISTIAN FAITH

in

## CHRISTIAN LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION

John A. Knight

### Introduction

It would be difficult to imagine a more challenging age than ours for Christian higher education. In spite of the recent revival of interest in religious studies on college and university campuses, there is a spiritual poverty in some quarters of academia that in some ways is as devastating as the material poverty in the ghetto.

Some think liberal education is largely dead. Its humanistic heartbeat has failed, they think, and rigor mortis is setting in throughout the giant educational system. There are new voices, however, extolling the virtues of liberal studies (including some from business, of all places).

Many of the most sensitive students feel spiritually starved--a partial explanation for the continuing preoccupation with the occult and the increasing attractiveness of the eastern religions. One student of a large university, at the end of a "Great Issues" conference, said: "In the course of all these meetings, I have never heard anyone mention the word 'God' [in an inclusive sense]. Isn't that a great issue?" Too often only the "gods" are talked about.

Reflecting on the failure of the American universities to promulgate a sense of shared ethical values, Dr. James H. Billington, former professor of history at Princeton University and now Director of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, has said: "Meaningful humanistic [liberal arts] education will have to be conducted in smaller, less impersonal human communities...The rich, but empty, educational establishment may even have to re-examine its condescending attitude toward the

denominational college" (Life, May, 1968).

While prophets of doom for two decades have told us that small church colleges or church-related colleges cannot survive because of economic pressures (and perhaps others as well), we should remind ourselves that such colleges may "well be our last best hope" (Elton Trueblood). Viewed in this way, Christian higher education is indeed a ministry. As college presidents and servants of the Church, we are charged with the responsibility of fulfilling it.

It is my purpose in these cursory remarks to share with you a part of my understanding of our responsibility as administrators and as Christian educators in a Christian liberal arts setting. Primarily, I want to describe the point of reference and portray the bare outline of the vision which to me are appropriate in accomplishing our mission as Nazarene educators. My thoughts are only germinal and at best merely suggest a basic starting point or perspective. I would be pleased if they stimulated further and more creative insights regarding our assignment and this particular topic.

My basic thesis is that we must not merely approach our challenge defensively, but offensively and aggressively as well. By use of these terms, I mean that our goal must not be simply to "preserve" something, e.g., the status quo; but also to invade and alter the secular mind-set of our students--actually to give them tools to cope with and conquer the pagan presuppositions of our non-Christian culture.

Is a Christian college a kind of last fortress against change, a mechanism for preserving a given cultural lifestyle? Is it a place where certain facts are learned which are to arm one for the mere defense of competing ideas throughout the rest of one's life? Is it a kind of safe

retreat where one develops certain emotive attachments that will insure the impossibility of any future change?

If it is nothing more than these, then our investment is a poor one. Is it unthinkable that a Christian college might be a holy catalyst that effects enriching changes in the lives of men and societies? Can you think of any necessary reason why a Christian college could not be an instrument for equipping students and faculty to be creatively oriented, rather than disoriented, in an inevitably and rapidly changing society? Are there reasons why a Christian college can't offer the student a world-view which not only holds its own in the arena of intellectual conflict, but actually overpowers all secularism, humanism, and impersonalism with its sound reasoning, unswerving loyalties, and dedication to the service of real men? Is it too idealistic to believe that Christian education can make possible wholesome and responsible moral choices in a pluralistic society such as ours?

If we cannot answer these <sup>QUESTIONS</sup> in the negative, we should not be involved in Christian higher education.

What I have to suggest applies, I think, to those who teach in our classrooms, those who direct our residence halls and campus activities, those who plan and implement our chapels, convocations and revivals, and certainly to those of us who are charged with creating and maintaining the kind of environment, instruction, and modeling which nurture Christian growth and preparation for Christian service.

I am convinced that we are not left with a choice between a "Christian anti-intellectualism" and an "anti-Christian intellectualism" (Albert Outler's terms). The former may be far more dangerous than the latter. Rather, a "Christian intellectualism" is a live option--and a necessity if we are to accomplish our task as Christian educators.

### Our Starting Point

Clearly for us, the Bible is the primary data with which we must work in developing our stance of "Christian intellectualism." We believe that Scripture functions authoritatively as a divine means both for transforming believers internally and personally and for conveying fixed revelatory truths. Therefore, I begin with selected Scriptures which provide the clue for what I take to be our position:

St. John: "Love is of God, and everyone that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not, knoweth not God, for God is love."

St. Paul: "God commended His love toward us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."

"God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself."

St. John: "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believeth on Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace (gifts) and truth."

Jesus: "I am the truth."

"Ye shall know the Truth and the Truth shall make you free."

St. Paul: "Christ--the wisdom and the power of God."

### Basic Affirmations for Christian Educators

From these Scriptures, the record of God's revelation, the following Christian affirmations may be deduced. These fundamental declarations must not be lost, or neglected, or buried due to "administrivia" which usurps so

much of our time and thought.

1. Jesus Christ is the full revelation of God, or Truth, and this revelation is the key to all knowledge--that which unlocks the meaning of all events and facts.

2. Truth has both a cognitive and existential element within it. Full-orbed Truth is personal encounter by a person with the Person. Truth, then, is a relationship of selves.

3. A corollary of number 2 is that, although Truth is unitary, there are different orders or levels of truth. For example, the statement that "whosoever believes on Christ has eternal life" is true, but being a mere statement, it is inferior to the truth which is the relationship of actually having eternal life. Truth, then, includes both specific linguistic formulations--statements of fact--and also genuine moral transformations.

4. Ultimate Truth is not an achievement by man, either by his good works of charity, or by his intellectual acumen. It is a gift, not an attainment. To put the matter in more traditional theological terms, Faith, in the sense of a genuine divine-human encounter precedes, that is, is superior to, Reason.

This claim neither despises reason, man's God-given capacity to think and determine, nor philosophical pursuits, the actual use of this capacity. It does assert that reason is limited and at best serves only a portion of man's total being. This understanding, in my view, constitutes the fundamental element in the genius of Nazarene higher education.

Truth, according to Christian faith, is not only "wisdom," but also "power" (to use Paul's terminology). Non-Christian and pre-Christian philosophers may arrive at some kind of understanding of God and Truth as being Love, but the specific embodiment of Love (agape)--wherever it exists--is not the result of Reason. It is the gift of God. Thus, insofar



as any philosophers have actually been "converted," that is, justified or accepted of God (as, for example, Socrates, according to some), it is not by the will of man, nor by the will of the flesh--human reason. Rather, their "conversion" or grasp of Truth is a supernatural gift, a personal relationship--in whatever degree--to God.

The Clue to a proper interpretation of all knowledge is Christ. This is not to say that Truth is found only in Christian faith. As Wesley rightly saw, Truth and truths may exist among non-Christians and pre-Christians--persons who lived before or outside the full knowledge of Christ. It is to say that no truth exists anywhere which is not a gift of God; and also that no particular truths found anywhere are inconsistent with the other affirmations, all of which are implied in the Christian revelation.

#### The Christian Liberal Arts Teacher

Having asserted these basic principles, we must now raise the question: How do these generalizations affect the pedagogical attitudes and methods of our Christian teachers in a Christian liberal arts setting?

1. Because Truth is personal encounter with God and more than the acquisition or appropriation of particular truths, their teaching cannot be reduced to the mere dispensing of knowledge, nor even to the mere encouragement of their students to search for certain "truths" apprehended by the mind. The liberal arts discipline, and certainly the Christian liberal arts discipline, includes more than isolated collections of various subject matters, although foundational knowledge regarding these disciplines is presupposed.

Learning that water is two parts hydrogen and one part oxygen (which pretty much exhausts my knowledge of physics, or is it chemistry?) is

valuable as a methodological tool, but the assignment of Christian higher education is only partially done if our students learn merely a given body of scientific, historical, sociological, literary or philosophical "facts."

Christian college professors are to teach for the enlightenment of the mind and for the moral and spiritual transformation of the individual and, through them, of society. And I am not limiting this transformation of persons simply to two trips to an altar--although this is a good beginning. By "moral and spiritual transformation" I mean having one's innate capacity for fellowship with God and our fellow human beings vitalized and sensitized so that, by continual dependence on the grace of God, it finds within community its own true dominant freedom and creative zest for service.

Christian (Nazarene) higher education must regenerate, as well as inform. (It was at this more profound level, and not in some shallow sense, that Socrates and other Greek philosophers insisted that "knowledge is virtue." They have generally been misunderstood at this point.) Teaching on our campuses must be aimed at the embodiment of Christian love in the total life of the student. While this "conversion" is not predictable, nor automatic--and by the way, the element of mystery and awe must always be appreciated by the Christian liberal arts teachers and student--yet our teaching, both by precept and example, can be so offered to God as a sacrifice that He may choose to use our understanding and our spirit to bring about a transformation of our students.

2. Since all Truth, wherever it is found, has its meaning in Christ, every discipline and every Christian teacher are brought under the judgment of Christian faith. Practically, this means that our professors' interpretation of the facts of knowledge (as well as our own) must be within the framework of Christian faith, that is, appraised and judged by Christian faith.

Liberal "education is the elucidation of the Eternal Purpose in its bearing on all areas of life. It is the understanding and application of Agape, both in terms of divine-human relations and also with regard to the meaning and nature of society as such and of environmental processes. Only the Absolute (known in Christ) is educationally adequate....'True education and character building are possible only when learning is not simply accumulative, but is rather an expanding circle of understanding.' In this sense, [Christian] education should be both 'organic' and 'concentric.'" (Nels F. S. Ferre)

Genuine growth in knowledge (and continuous growth must characterize both teacher and student) within the Christian liberal arts framework is possible only out of the soil of a distinctively Christian weltanschauung (world view), which encompasses all fields of knowledge, for, as Paul put it, "In Christ all things cohere." Without this deliberately articulated world-view the Christian liberal arts college is not distinctive from other colleges, nor is it different in function from the Church, or a particular congregation of believers. And it must be different from the Church because of its academic demands, though not contrary to it.

The role of the Christian liberal arts teacher is to provide this framework or stance from which the student may evaluate and understand the significance of scholarly opinion. The teacher of philosophy and world religions must understand these disciplines against the background of the Christian revelation; the teacher of the behavioral sciences seeks to view man in the light of the perfect Man, Jesus Christ; the teacher of the natural sciences considers the processes of Nature from within the perspective of God's continuous creation; the teacher of the arts and literature makes them meaningful to the student by an appreciation for Christian



values. Ideally, then, Christian liberal arts education does not offer less than liberal arts education, but more.

Furthermore, the Christian liberal arts teacher must be aware that the philosophical presuppositions of some views cannot be made to square with the Christian weltanschauung. For example, if Christ is Truth, then history is purposeful and meaningful. It is linear and teleological, moving toward an ultimate--the eschaton, the total reign of God's kingdom. It would, therefore, be inconsistent for a Christian liberal arts historian, or economist, or political scientist, or psychologist, or philosopher, or physical or biological scientist, or sociologist, or literary specialist, to advocate a philosophy of history--consciously or unconsciously--which asserts with the Greeks that history is cyclical ("history repeats itself"); or that history is predetermined by economic forces (Marxism); or that history is propelled solely by the futile, greedy, insane will to live and will to power (Schopenhauer); or that history is governed by the sex drive and that history's cultural institutions are merely defense mechanisms--weak dams to hide and stem the flood of sexual vitality (Freud); or that history is determined by sunspots and other "pressures" in our cosmic environment, producing historical rhythms as the moon causes ebbs and floods and diverts the appearance and disappearance of seaweeds in the Atlantic Ocean (19th century positivism); or that history is a branch of biologism (orthogenesis), where races grow up in youth, maturity and old age, like unconnected mushrooms, in which there is not even a survival of the fittest, because even the "fittest" race or culture has only a brief preordained span of life (Spengler); or that history is chaos, the absence of all organizing forces and selective value, the naturalistic negation of meaning, mere nonsense (Henry Ford: "History is bunk").

While there are valuable insights within each position, to substitute

any of these world-views for the Christian world-view, to entertain them or advance them as serious parallel possibilities alongside of the Christian weltanschauung would make us less than Christian liberal arts educators. In fact, it would violate our commitment to Christian higher education and overstep the boundaries of "academic freedom" as we understand it.

The philosophy of history which must underlie the teaching and understanding of all disciplines, including history, in a Christian liberal arts college must be grounded in Jesus Christ, the focal point in history, and in the Christian faith which declares that history is more than the more or less predictable processes of Nature or even culture; that it is the unfolding of God's action to make Himself known to man, and is therefore under the sovereign control of an all-loving God. History is "His-story." Anything less may have a place in a liberal arts college, but not in a Christian liberal arts college--i.e., a college which interprets all "facts"--be they historical, scientific, or otherwise--from a recognized stance, namely, "God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself." It is this perspective which provided the rationale for endowing many of our early Nazarene colleges with the name "university"--which, as we know, comes from the Latin terms uni (one) and veritas (truth). Modern secular universities have long ago departed from the ideal of the medieval Christian educational institutions, which gave us the name "university" and interpreted all knowledge in light of the revelation in Jesus Christ.

3. If truths and even Truth in some limited degree are found outside of Christianity--as Christian theologians repeatedly have claimed--then no area of investigation is outside the bounds of genuine, open-minded inquiry in the Christian liberal arts setting. To accept Christ as the Truth, is to be freed (The "truth shall make you free") to explore, discover, analyze,

and relate. To be thus freed is to be released from all anxiety that something may be uncovered by the physical scientist or social anthropologist, which must be accepted beyond all reasonable doubt but which at the same time is contradictory to Christian faith. If Christ is the Truth, such circumstance is as much a logical impossibility as is a round square.

The Christian liberal arts teacher, then, is freed to investigate seriously, and not with condescending attitude, all affirmations of all legitimate disciplines. Not only is the Christian instructor freed to do this, he/she is obligated to do so, particularly in crucial and frequently misunderstood areas, as, for example, the evolutionary account of man's origins as advanced by Darwin and others who have modified his thought; or the relation of the authority of the Bible to the means by which it was inspired and written; or the relation of realism in literature to pornography. The implications of the lordship of Christ must be reflected upon in every area of thought and life in order to bring all things into "captivity to the mind of Christ."

Strong obligation impinges upon the Christian liberal arts teacher to make the student aware both of particular scientific conclusions, and also of non-Christian philosophies and world-views. Though for pedagogical reasons he/she should be mindful of the student's capacities and readiness to learn, nonetheless the teacher must do this for the good of the students who may naively elevate particular scientific positions to a metaphysical world-view, or substitute a non-Christian philosophy in the place of the Christian weltanschauung.

The Christian teacher must help the student to become aware also for the sake of evangelism. To know nothing of alternatives to Christian faith is not to follow Jesus' command "not to be of the world." Instead, it is to

fail to note His recognition of the obvious, that His followers are in fact "in the world." And to live in isolation as though we are not in the world is both to remove our field of evangelism and to misconstrue our task of evangelism (it is the sick who need a physician and not those who are whole).

Furthermore, the Christian liberal arts teacher is obligated to investigate with students all non-Christian alternatives because he/she is committed to Truth wherever it (He) is found. To his amazement, in the process he may discover that certain positions which he has taken to be distinctive tenets of Christian faith may be simply his personal and unnecessary impositions upon the biblical or Christian data. For example, medieval man used the erroneous scientific notion that the earth is the center of the universe to support the Christian view that man is the special object of God's concern. Here is a clear case of a sound position being supported by faulty evidence, and which in time brought the Church into disrepute because it mistakenly assumed that to give up the "evidence" is also to surrender the truth concerning God's relation to man.

The Christian liberal arts teacher, then, is obligated to subject his faith fearlessly to the myriad positions which are held in repute in scholarly circles. By so doing, his faith becomes the stronger--not by closing one's eyes to truth--but by distinguishing those positions which are intrinsic to Christian faith from those which are extrinsic to it. By confronting our faith with contemporary culture and thought patterns we may learn that which is essential (diaphora) and that which is non-essential (adiaphora), or that which is primary or fundamental (worthy of defense) and that which is secondary (worthy of little or no defense). Dr. J. B. Chapman's frequent reminder is on target here: "A wise general defends a

short line."

The confrontation of our faith with contemporary facets of life must be made with the deepest Christian motivation and in a spirit of genuine humility. Of this we cannot be reminded too often or too fervently. We must bring it about not for the purpose of displaying abundance of knowledge, nor even for the sole purpose of jostling the student in his/her intellectual nest; but rather for the good of the student, for the development of the whole man, for the improvement of society, and for the glory of God. Therefore, we must be neither overly protective, nor unnecessarily disruptive. Our pedagogical procedure at this point must be determined, not by mere sentimentality, but by Love--God's kind of love exhibited concretely in Jesus Christ and reflected in our personal lives.

#### Brief Recapitulation

Presupposed in the foregoing comments is the belief that Faith or Truth precedes Reason, in the sense that it includes more than Reason--since ultimate Truth or Christ, as the Apostle Paul says, is the "power" of God as well as the "wisdom" of God.

On the other hand, these propositions also are based on the premise that Truth includes and encompasses Reason. (John William Fletcher contended that revelation includes "right reason.") Therefore, one cannot know Truth without at the same time loving the Lord with all the mind, as well as with all the heart and soul and strength. To encounter Christ, who is the Truth, is to be motivated to seek specific truths (correct facts) through a thorough investigation of any and every area of knowledge--science, mathematics, history, sociology, literature, fine arts, health care, politics, economics, and philosophy, etc.

To accept only the former premise--that Faith is prior to, or perhaps even excludes, Reason--is to become dogmatic, narrow, intolerant, bigoted,



and theoretically, if not practically, unchristian. It is to espouse a "Christian anti-intellectualism." To approve only the latter emphasis on Reason, independently of the revelation in Christ, is to become presumptuous, arrogant, coldly intellectualistic, and morally impotent--and theoretically, if not practically, unchristian. It is to adopt an "anti-Christian intellectualism."

To reject one of these premises in total disregard of the other is either to have at best a Christian institution (and probably less) which is not a liberal arts college; or perhaps to have a liberal arts college which is not Christian. The Christian liberal arts teacher is grounded in the central Truth that Christ is both the "wisdom" and the "power" of God. Such a position may be called a "Christian intellectualism." And for Nazarene Christian liberal arts teachers and educators, I believe it is an imperative.

#### An Offensive Battle for the Mind

My remarks to this point have addressed the Christian teacher's perspective and methodology, and implicitly the administrator's responsibility to encourage and motivate our professors to understand and evaluate their disciplines from the standpoint of Christian faith and practice. My closing words are directed primarily to us presidents. They relate to our vision of what Christian colleges can do to counter the secular, humanistic mindset (or "will-set" as Carl F. H. Henry calls it) which is capturing the minds of our students, our constituents, and our society.

Dr. Henry's book, The Christian Mindset in a Secular Society (1984), which is a collection of his addresses given in recent years, has helped me see the challenge and opportunity we have as educators during the balance of this century (and perhaps beyond). In his chapter on "Evangelism," he

discusses the naturalistic philosophy, often observed in the form of secular humanism, which predominates in the classrooms of the American colleges and universities where twelve million persons are enrolled. Yet even here there is a Christian witness being given by tens of thousands of students, and by some professors as well. However, a concerted effort to conquer the secular presuppositions has not been made. In spite of some encouraging signs, Henry says:

There is nonetheless a great failure to battle for the intellect and to dispute secular humanism, an internally inconsistent and reductionist theory of reality, one that God in his revelation expressly repudiates. Neither the seminaries nor the evangelical colleges have shaped a pertinent literature that boldly and powerfully addresses the secular learning that governs the mood of the age. This nonfulfillment of an academic responsibility needlessly accommodates the tide of philosophical hostility toward biblical theism. The present mood of the campus is anti-intellectual, to be sure; students absorb nonbiblical teaching not so much to appropriate it as to take a rain-check on inherited beliefs. Only 10 percent of the students on many campuses are academically serious students; among evangelical students, unfortunately, the number is probably less rather than more. In many places, moreover, the non-intellectual mood has been remedied little by either Campus Crusade or Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship. Never have there been so many wasted young minds and rootless intellects. Some of our prestigious universities first arose in order to equip leaders to preach the gospel. We must take more seriously

the liberating significance of Jesus for the intellectual. In a world of learning that wallows in beggarly excuses for unbelief we once again must set forth a mind-stretching theology and adduce sound reason for our hope (p. 60).

In another of his chapters, "Trumpeting God's Word to a Nation in Decision" (first presented at the 40th annual convention of the National Religious Broadcasters in Washington, D.C., February, 1983), Dr. Henry laments the fact that in a single generation experiential and existential concerns have come to overshadow interest in theology and classic philosophical questions so much so that "the great doctrines of the faith survive only like a few shredded nuts loosely scattered over ice cream" (p. 24). He observes that in his college days the most popular major on campus was philosophy (now some of us don't even offer it), and "no senior was graduated without a course in logic and without mastering James Orr's Christian View of God and the World" (p. 24).

Henry, following the lead of Kenneth Kantzer, suggests that our "weakened evangelical influence" is due not merely to cultural change, but "also to the fact that our constituency includes too few of the intellectual elite. We are in desperate need of a renewal of evangelical intellectual life.....Could not our network of strongly evangelical colleges....present the case for God and biblical theism? In earlier generations great colleges were deliberately established to reflect the intellectual credentials of Christianity" (p. 24).

Henry envisions that this be done through mass media presentations. That may be too ambitious for us, but surely we can attempt the task on a less grandiose scale by rewarding faculty dialogue, encouraging cross-disciplinary discussions, involving our brightest and most committed

students, promoting seminars, conferences, mini-non/credit courses, or lecture series with the best apologists for Christian faith--and by giving high visibility to these efforts in our communities. No doubt other and better means can be employed to make a massive counter-offensive on the secular mindset. In so doing we might enjoy some measure of success, and at the least we would be saying to students and constituents and citizens in our communities that Christian faith provides a solid place to stand, and that we are serious about integrating faith, learning, and living.

Several factors seem to encourage the pursuit of this goal: a) the continuing interest in religious matters on college and university campuses; b) the increasing numbers of spokesmen who are lamenting the decline of interest in the humanities and liberal studies, and appealing for objectivity in moral imperatives. If the universities are producing a generation of "highly skilled barbarians" as Stephen Muller, president of Johns Hopkins University, suggests, then our finest hour may be approaching. c) Further, there are materials being produced to assist us. For example, The Institute for Advanced Christian Studies (with the help of Eerdmans Publishing Company) has initiated the publication of "Studies in a Christian World View," a series of 10 paperback texts at the junior college level. The series gives Christian perspectives on various liberal arts disciplines.

I am not capable of detailing means to meet this challenge of demonstrating the superiority of Christian faith to the current secular mindset. Together, however, we could influence the direction and discussions of future theology conferences; help make Nazarene Student Leaders' Conferences more meaningful and challenging intellectually; solicit the creativity of our religion and philosophy faculties, as well as other capable campus leaders. Apart from any other visible results, our efforts should enable Nazarene academia to recover, at least in some measure, the

conviction of shared spiritual and communal values and promulgate them to our searching younger generation.

Nathan Pusey, former president of Harvard, remarked at commencement exercises a generation ago that "the least that can be expected" from a university graduate is that he or she "pronounce the name of God without embarrassment." If Nazarene colleges, being Christian liberal arts colleges, are the true universities by virtue of our deliberate attempts to understand and present all truths in light of the Christian revelation in Jesus Christ, we may believe that with Divine blessing and working our students can come to pronounce the name of God--that is, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ--with a profound sense of awe and mystery, and also with commitment and confidence, exuberance and joy.

A paper prepared to be read to the Nazarene College Presidents at the Faith, Learning, and Living Conference at Point Loma Nazarene College, San Diego, California, June 18-20, 1985--by John A. Knight, Ph.D. President, Bethany Nazarene College.