

# Beyond the Hothouse

## higher education outside the Christian college

Kenneth W. Hermann

The church has a long tradition of supporting Christian higher education for its young people. We ground that support in the claim that no area of study can be independent from the authority of Christ. We try to frame our study of every discipline with a distinctly Christian understanding. Toward that end we have established many fine Christian colleges and several reputable graduate schools each serving a vital role in preparing young people to serve the Lord in the full range of their cultural tasks.

But not all Christian young people attend Christian colleges and graduate schools. Many attend public universities—and they need a Christian education as well. In virtually all of our discussions on the importance of a Christian higher education we have overlooked this significant and growing number of Christian students.

Why have we not included students at the public university in our mandate for Christian higher education? Certainly not because of willful neglect or unconcern. In fact, an important clue lies in our very preoccupation with the definition of Christian higher education and the implications that flow out of that definition. Most significantly we have failed to retain the full meaning of the adjective *Christian* in our understanding. We have made Christian higher education virtually synonymous with Christian colleges. Of course, we are partly right in doing so when we mean that Christian higher education does occur at colleges deeply rooted in their confession that Christ is Lord over academic life. This is the meaning we most commonly have in mind; and there is no harm in using the terms in that way. The danger comes in assuming that Christian colleges exhaust the meaning of Christian higher education. We restrict the meaning of *Christian* to education received at particular *institutions*. Higher education outside of those institutions escapes our attention, and we thereby lose sight of an essential dimension of the adjective *Christian*: every framework for understanding any discipline in whatever institution must be shaped by allegiance to Christ; it must be *Christian* education. Every student who confesses Christ must get a Christian education, whether at a Christian college or at a public university. Christian higher education, in this expanded sense, embraces both Christian institutions and the responsibility of all students

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to study in light of their obedience to Christ. Failing to see this, we lose sight of Christians at the public university and our responsibility to them.

A second tendency is to define Christian education in terms of the subjects taught rather than the perspective from which all subjects are taught. Christian liberal arts colleges, by their very nature, emphasize a broad appreciation for such fields as history, literature, music, philosophy, and theology. This is where their greatest strength has been historically; many have distinguished themselves in these fields. They have traditionally shown a correspondingly less—though growing—emphasis on the technical and professional fields such as engineering, business, and management. In light of this our young people frequently receive the impression, and often the advice, that if they are interested in the humanities, then a Christian liberal arts education is best. If, on the other hand, they intend to major in some technical or professional field, then a public university education is preferable.

In this view Christian education is defined by the subjects taught; some subjects require a Christian understanding while others do not. But of course we do not believe this. There are no Christian subjects, although there are subjects which focus on the content of the Christian faith; there are only Christian perspectives for understanding each and every subject, from algebra to zoology. Every discipline is *subject* to Christ. Students might have many valid reasons for attending a public university, but one of them is surely not that the courses offered there, especially the technical and professional ones, require a less explicit Christian framework. It is difficult not to give this impression when we define Christian higher education in terms of areas studied.

A corollary to restricting the meaning of Christian higher education to institutions and subjects is a tendency to divide our academic from our pastoral responsibility to Christian students. We provide sound teaching to students at Christian colleges while we provide sound pastoral care for students at the public university. The church, along with many parachurch organizations, has followed its students to the university. There it provides worship and fellowship opportunities, counseling, Bible studies, encouragement for evangelism, and many other important dimensions of pastoral care.

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The tacit assumption underlying this division seems to be that only students who attend Christian colleges need to hear Christ's claim on their academic lives while those who study at the public university need to hear Christ's claim only on their worship, devotions, and outreach. This assumption reveals a wide chasm in our view of Christian education, to say nothing of our view of the Christian life. We are not satisfied, for example, with Christians in business who believe that they are fully meeting their responsibilities by only having noon-hour Bible studies and prayer meetings. No, we want them to develop a Christian framework within which to think deeply about the very nature, structure, and task of their businesses. The same must be true for all Christian students wherever they study. Fellowship groups are not a substitute for academic obedience, only its support.

We are right to maintain an important distinction between academic and pastoral care. This valid distinction, however, threatens to become a dichotomy when we say, as we often do, that we *teach* students at the Christian college and *minister* to students at the public university. We provide teachers for students at Christian colleges and *ministers* to students at public universities. What is the basis for thinking in this way? The only possible justification would be that we have not yet been able to support Christian educators at the public university. It clearly could not be that students at the public university have any less critical need for Christian academic care. The point is not to diminish the fine work of campus ministers. It is rather to underscore the importance of both pastoral and academic care for Christian young people wherever they study. For students at the public university, we must supplement pastors with teachers, not substitute pastors for teachers. Institutionally dividing academic care from pastoral care demonstrates an impoverished understanding of the church's task to provide for the full maturity of its young people, including the academic and the pastoral, wherever they study.

**W**e need to be very sensitive to what this narrow view of Christian higher education communicates to our young people. Many very quickly pick up

the suggestion that they can receive a Christian education only at a Christian college. If they were really serious about receiving such an education, they would, of course, attend a Christian college, or transfer to one after they saw how important it was. Implicit in this attitude is that a public university education is a *secular* education. But this is surely false. Secular (in its modern sense) does not refer to the institution in which one studies; it refers to the orientation of one's study in any institution. We might accurately say that students at the public university are confronted by secular paradigms in many courses. But that does not necessarily mean that they must adopt them. The threat of secularism cannot be neatly contained in any particular institution; students in every institution of higher education, even Christian colleges, are in danger of adopting alien academic perspectives. Neither the institution one attends nor the subjects one studies guarantees a Christian education; only faithful obedience to Christ wherever and whatever one studies qualifies an education as Christian.

Students also get the impression that the Lord somehow expects less of them if they attend a public university. They are not expected to struggle as deeply with forming a Christian worldview as their peers at the Christian college. The Lord will presumably understand their difficult situation and be more lenient with them for not bowing before him in their studies. The most the Lord expects is concern for worship, devotional life, and occasional witnessing. If they do show a concern for how being a Christian ought to direct their studies, it is considered an extra, not an essential, dimension of their Christian life. This view is alarmingly widespread among Christian young people at the public universities. It must be stemmed with a clear explanation of the full meaning of Christian education.

These impressions feed the desire of many young people who consciously choose to attend universities to "get away" from the Lord and hide from their Christian commitments, especially the commitment to a Christian education. Clearly they cannot get away from the Lord's claims merely by attending the university. The church should explain to its young people seeking a post-high school education that they have two choices: they can either serve the Lord at a Christian college or serve the Lord at a public institution. In either place they must serve the Lord. But if they rarely, if ever, hear the challenge to honor the Lord in the university classroom, what other conclusion can they draw, except that the Lord expects less of them there?

I trust that no one intends to convey these impressions to Christian students. To avoid giving them, however, the Christian community must assume its academic obligations by concretely demonstrating to its young people that the Lord *does*, indeed, expect to

be fully honored in their academic pursuits wherever they study. The focus of the community should be on Christian students, not Christian institutions. The responsibility to be a disciple of Jesus Christ in academic life falls equally on all students who profess faith in him. Just as full-time Christian service cannot be reserved for pastors, missionaries, and denominational employees, so also Christian education cannot be restricted to only those attending Christian colleges. This focus on the Christian student also enables the Christian community to see its obligation both to those at Christian colleges and to those at public universities—with no implied ranking in importance.

**W**hether we approve it or not, we must face the fact that an increasing number of our young people are attending public universities. I have not been able to uncover any statistics on this trend, but my impression is that more Christian college students attend public universities than Christian colleges. This trend shows no sign of slowing down; in all likelihood it will accelerate. It is, of course, unfair to assume that the students headed for the public universities are less serious in their desire to serve the Lord than those who attend Christian colleges. For many the cost of a private education is prohibitive. For others, the large state universities offer specialized courses and provide a diversity of resources that smaller Christian liberal arts colleges cannot match.

Nor should they try. I am not suggesting that Christian colleges shape themselves into the image of the state schools to attract these students. On the contrary, I believe that several have already advanced too far down this road and are in danger of compromising their integrity as distinctly liberal arts colleges. Even if Christian colleges were to become smaller replicas of the public universities, some Christian students would still attend public universities, and the challenge to address their need for Christian education would remain. That a large number of our young people enroll at public institutions does not mean we should lament the fact, change the character of Christian colleges, or step up recruiting efforts. We must creatively follow these students to the public university and insure that their education is itself Christian.

Students who enroll at state schools, especially for technical and professional training, demand special attention since they are working in areas which have potentially significant influence in shaping our culture. Present trends promise to give them even greater influence. Furthermore, it is in these kinds of fields—business, for example, or personnel administration, or engineering of all kinds—where secular paradigms are most firmly entrenched, least questioned, and cultur-

ally most formative. These students will not be helped by reading a few books in apologetics which in any case do not deal with the complex issues raised in their fields, nor by attending devotional Bible studies and fellowship meetings.

They need academics in their fields who will challenge them to think deeply and critically about the philosophical foundations of their disciplines (especially since these disciplines do not acknowledge their philosophical assumptions) and to develop a distinctly Christian framework for understanding them. These young people are vital to sustaining and broadening Christian cultural leadership. Without the challenge of a Christian education laid before them, they are in danger of moving into their professional lives with a faith that is, as Os Guinness characterizes it, privately engaging but socially irrelevant.

We could make a strong case that students at the public university require even more academic attention than those at the Christian college. They are directly confronted with sophisticated and commonly assumed secular worldviews that demand critical discernment. The vast majority of Christian students lack a coun-

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tering Christian worldview when they arrive at the university (and all too often when they leave it). If they are not systematically challenged to develop one as a normal part of their Christian maturity and education, it is highly unlikely that they will work one out on their own, even if they know where to turn for help. Without such a perspective, many are easily intimidated; they abandon the "childishness" of Christianity, which they are told is irrelevant to academic life, for the more appealing "adult" worldviews of the classroom, which are equated with proper scientific understanding. Christians who lose their faith at college do so not so much because they have been reasoned out of it, but because their frail bits-and-pieces Christian worldview has slowly dissolved in the powerful solvent of articulate secularist worldviews. The church has a deep pastoral obligation to provide the crucial intellectual resources students need to develop a comprehensive and integral Christian vision of life which neutralizes its rival secular alternatives.

Students at Christian colleges do not confront this kind of pressure. They have the luxury of interacting

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with secular perspectives only indirectly through lectures and books, all with ample Christian critique. With rare exceptions, they do not face the existential urgency of coming to terms with Plato, Newton, Kant, Marx, Darwin, Levi-Strauss, Rogers, Drucker, Wiener, Kohlberg, to name a few of the dominant shapers of Western thought. In my Christian college days these were only names, if they were mentioned at all, to be easily dismissed since I was told they were wrong. I never had to explain *why* they were wrong in the face of hostile peers and an intimidating professor. Not until I went to graduate school was I forced to struggle with them and grope alone for an alternative Christian paradigm. My point is not to use the "hothouse" argument against the Christian colleges. It is rather to call attention to the Christian community's critical higher educational responsibilities for its young people at the public universities.

**I**nherent in a broad view of Christian higher education is a concern for the public university as a university. Christian students, as well as staff and faculty, have integrity in being there and have the rightful duty to take the university seriously as a formative cultural institution which also exists under the authority of Jesus Christ. We must not view the university as merely a convenient place for evangelism or a fate to be endured while resting periodically in the oasis of fellowship meetings. It is certainly not an institution which Christians can justifiably abandon. It must be challenged on its own terms as an academic institution from a Christian perspective.

Charles Malik, in a *Christian Critique of the University* (Inter-Varsity, 1982), forcefully argues that the church must "realize that no greater service can it render both itself and the cause of the gospel, with which it has been entrusted, than to recapture the universities for Christ on whom they were originally founded." This means, he contends, that the church must critically evaluate every aspect of university life: the development and content of the curriculum; the way history, society, persons, and ethics are interpreted; and the dominant "spiritual climate" indicated by the topics which are included and excluded from consideration. This critical assessment is very different from sponsoring evangelistic crusades, counseling, holding Bible

studies and fellowships, or leading isolated persons to Christ.

All these endeavors are praiseworthy and necessary, but the problem of the university is other than and much more formidable than all of them. It is whether a necessary condition for the highest creativity of the intellect is precisely to have nothing to do with Jesus Christ. (Pp. 100-102)

The only way the church can meet this demanding agenda is to broaden its vision of Christian higher education to include the public university.

Before I go on to suggest some proposals for implementing a broadened vision of Christian higher education, I want to clarify what I have and have not been arguing. In no way is my argument meant to diminish the critical role which Christian colleges play in the education of our young people. They should remain the academic leaders of the Christian community. Expanding our vision of Christian higher education to include the public university should not be understood to diminish their importance or threaten their health. I believe, on the contrary, that with creative leadership, a broadened vision of Christian higher education can only strengthen their position and broaden their support.

I am also not blaming Christian colleges for failing to reach students at the public university. I have purposely placed the burden on the entire Christian community. No single institution bears full responsibility for this oversight nor can any single institution deal adequately with the immense challenge. This is due largely to the fact that no current institution has this dimension of Christian higher education as its specific mandate. Consequently, the task falls between the cracks of existing institutions. One of my proposals, discussed more fully below, is to create a new institution for this explicit purpose.

I am further not questioning the excellent work of campus ministers. They perform an essential service for students. My point is rather that there is an important distinction between academic and pastoral care; they deal with different needs of the same students. I am not even suggesting that campus ministry be expanded to include this academic dimension—any more than I would argue that pastors of congregations should deal with all of the specialized needs of their parishioners. The Christian community must differentiate its responsibilities to students at the public university and must provide the resources to support both pastoring and teaching, just as it does on Christian college campuses.

**S**ince the Christian community does have a clear responsibility to support Christian education at the

public university, we must explore various avenues of approach and follow those which are most promising in each particular context. Already, several organizations exist in different parts of the country that are attempting to implement the need for Christian education at public institutions; these include the McKenzie Study Center in Eugene, Oregon, C.S. Lewis in Washington, D.C., the Maclaurin Institute in Minneapolis, the Hearing and Doing Program in Toronto, Christian Educational Services in Pittsburgh, and several others. These organizations, however, are generally isolated from one another and, most importantly, are not integrated into the church's overall vision for Christian higher education.

Many of the following proposals have been suggested by others. In fact, most of them were discussed by a group of about twenty persons, including Christian college faculty and administrators, campus ministry staff, denominational officials, and others already making such efforts, at Pittsburgh in March 1982. Unfortunately, the proposals that emerged from that meeting have yet to find their way into practice.

1. Christian colleges might contribute their expertise by, for example, appointing adjunct faculty to teach Christian worldview and academic perspectives courses at public universities where that is possible; encouraging faculty members to take their sabbatical at a university where, in cooperation with local campus ministry groups, they could teach one or more courses in foundational perspectives; developing extension courses at public universities in their area where feasible; challenging their faculty to make their syllabi and other resources available to Christians at the university; and coordinating their efforts with existing agencies.

2. One or more Christian colleges (or the Christian College Coalition?) might organize a summer institute where public university students could take basic, even advanced, courses in their fields of study.

3. Denominations and local congregations must see this dimension of Christian higher education as a legitimate aspect of their pastoral concern for students and support, even initiate, such efforts for the students in their care.

4. Christian faculty at the public university have a very important role to fill. They could organize them-

selves into study groups which explore the implications of a Christian worldview for gaining insight into their respective disciplines as well as for assessing, following Malik's advice, the entire life of the university. They should be a prophetic presence. In so doing they would enrich not only their own faith but also that of the Christian students at their university.

5. Campus ministry groups should be encouraged to stress the importance of the academic task of students and provide resources to those who are interested.

6. In spite of the sincere efforts of all presently existing organizations to fill this need, we may have to develop a new organization, possibly along the lines of the Association for Calvinist Philosophy in the Netherlands, which has as its central purpose the support of Christian higher education at the public university. The financial support for such an organization could come from Christian colleges, Christian faculty, local congregations, and the broader Christian community which shares this burden. This organization might have the following roles:

- a. Develop, write, publish, and distribute syllabi, articles, and books, as well as audio and video cassettes, all dealing with shaping a Christian framework for understanding various fields of study and professional service.
- b. Create a network of resource and study centers at public universities where none currently exist and work alongside existing ones.
- c. Organize a lecture series which brings Christian faculty members to public universities to speak about issues in their fields.

7. All those who have an interest in this opportunity need to discuss how these or other proposals can be initiated. Perhaps a conference should be organized to bring us together.

The calling of Christian students to serve the Lord in their academic pursuits at the public university requires the strong support of the entire Christian community. Going forward with any of these proposals raises complex problems that demand the determined and far-sighted leadership and cooperation of all existing organizations which share this concern. With the Lord's guidance, we can find ways to respond faithfully to our educational responsibility for Christian young people at public universities. ■