

The Necessity
of
Christian Universities
by
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*First Publication of this Second and Revised Edition,
Melbourne, The Research Press, 1994.*

Reprinted, September, 1996.

Papers on Christian Higher Education, number 1.

*First Edition, Amsterdam,
International Association for Reformed Faith and Action, 1965.*

Published for the
Association for Christian Higher Education in Australia, Inc., by
The Research Press,
P.O. Box 75, Montrose, Victoria, Australia, 3765.

THE NECESSITY OF CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITIES.¹

1. Life is Religion.

The thesis that life is religion, which serves as the starting-point for this discussion, is not the result of an "objective", empirical analysis of reality. It is, rather, the fruit of a deep conviction which human thought or fantasy is unable to produce, for this conviction must be revealed from a source external to ourselves. This thesis is no less than the confession that one's total thought-life, all our doings, and even the entire world in which we live and move, are utterly dependent upon a transcendent power. In other words, it means that not a single part of human life, and of the world that surrounds us, exists on its own or functions autonomously, or is explicable only in terms of its own existence and character. For not only did everything originate from God but it also consists in Him, Who, in Christ, has revealed Himself as the Creator and the Preserver of the entire cosmos.

Paul testifies to that when, in the famous Areopagus speech, he points out that in Him we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28). The whole universe originates from, and is upheld through, God's word of power (John 1:3-4; Hebrews 1:3, 11:3). This creative, upholding and invincible word (John 1:5) in a unique, original and redemptive way became human flesh in the Person of Jesus Christ, the Son of God (John 1:14). He was the second Adam, who replaced the first one, that other Son of God (Luke 3:38), and who did so because of Adam's failure (Romans 5:12-21; I Corinthians 5:20-22). Jesus accomplished His vocation on this earth to become the head of the new humanity and, wider, of the new creation (Matthew 28:18; I Corinthians 15:45,49; Ephesians 1:3-14; Philippians 2:9-11; Colossians 1:15-20). Only in this perspective can human life and the world around us be meaningfully interpreted.

¹ This paper was originally published in the *International Reformed Bulletin* 8 (1965): 23-32. The bulletin was the official organ of the International Association for Reformed Faith and Action. This edition has been fully revised. Dr. Jan D. Dengerink has occupied Chairs of Christian (Reformed) Philosophy at the Universities of Utrecht and Groningen, and is a past Secretary of the Board of the Free University of Amsterdam. This and subsequent footnotes have been added by the publishers.

That humankind through Adam proved unwilling to honour its full dependence on God's creative, redemptive and re-creative word, and presumed to decide autonomously what is good and evil (Genesis 3:5), has in fact turned out to be the source of all of our subsequent misery (Genesis 3:17-19). The fall of our first parents was a radical and comprehensive fall into sin. Each human capacity and every human function became affected by that fall. For that reason Paul emphasises that the whole creation groans and travails in pain until now (Romans 8:22).

The moment we lose sight of this situation we find ourselves in a quandary and, in addition to that, we form a distorted picture of redemption. For redemption is not a mere supernatural, added gift of grace hovering above daily life, but redemption is also radical and comprehensive. The redemptive goal is no less than life totally renewed, an entirely new humanity, a new heaven and a new earth, the re-creation of God's own creation now fallen in man's guilt. Therefore the creation, in the midst of its travail, lives in hope : "because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God" (Romans 8:21).

We know from the scriptures and from our own experience taught by the scriptures that, although its outcome was already decisively determined on the cross when Jesus cried "It is finished!", the struggle between sin and grace continues to be waged. The fronts are as broad as human life. The matter at issue is the great antithesis that exists between the kingdom of heaven and the domain of Satan. That antithesis was revealed by God Himself when He said, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel" (Genesis 3:15). At issue is not merely, therefore, an antagonism between good and evil in itself, but, rather, the undeniable enmity that exists between Christ and His disciples on the one hand and Satan and his consorts on the other - a very concrete issue. Christ Himself has said that in plain language (Matthew 10:5-39). And because the description of the two witnesses in the Book of Revelation makes it unmistakably plain that this struggle will gain in intensity, we shall do well to reject any illusion of a glorious tranquillity in the days ahead (Revelation 11:3-13).

We know too that at times the battle-line between the fronts can fluctuate unpredictably, especially because the line of demarcation will constantly cut through Christianity, the people of God, itself. Another complicating factor is that the enemy positions are not always plain; Satan often employs camouflage. The son of perdition has not yet been fully revealed. But over the entire front the "mystery of lawlessness" is already at work. Satan searches everywhere for victims. Only the restraining power of God prevents his total self-revelation (II Thessalonians 2:3-12). For that reason, we are constantly and repeatedly admonished in the New Testament, in the gospels as well as in the apostolic letters, to be watchful, sober, and constant in prayer.

We know also that the time for the separation of the wheat from the tares has not yet come. A premature separation might uproot some of the valued wheat (Matthew 13:24-30). The goodness of God is still enjoyed equally by the evil and the good (Matthew 5:45). Nevertheless, already here and now we are expected to make our choice and position plain. The apostle Paul admonishes us, with an appeal to the mercies of God, to present our bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God; to refuse to be conformed to this world but to be transformed by the renewing of our mind, so that we may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God (Romans 12:1-2). As the people of God we are called to show forth His marvelous acts (I Peter 2:9).

2. Scientific Work as Religious Activity.

It seemed useful and desirable to precede this discussion with these rather general considerations because, even though they are of a non-scientific nature and are not empirically verifiable, they are nevertheless of decisive significance for determining the position to be adopted by Christians in the scientific, and therefore, university enterprise. Among Christians, and even in more narrowly defined Evangelical circles, the notion still exists that, although scholarship is bound to certain external limits by religion and morality, nevertheless, in terms of its own inner nature it is a

more or less neutral, autonomous concern. Even those who explicitly confront the problem of (Christian) faith and scientific knowledge frequently fall victim to this conception. They accept the premise that facts are facts, and facts are the same for Christians. That can hardly be denied. Christians and non-Christians live and think in terms of the same created reality. But they frequently lose sight of the notion that scientific work consists not in giving a photographic but an interpretative and elucidative account of reality by way of a process of analysis and conceptualisation. And they forget that in this process the whole person continues to function in all his or her particularity, including the religious choice of position which motivates the scientist's selection of a certain path in scientific enquiry. In that light it may not even be correct to speak of faith *and* science. Such a formula may leave the impression that these two are relatively independent magnitudes which scientists and scholars, in this case Christian scientists and scholars, must somehow integrate. It is much closer to the truth to say that scientific work itself, due to its creaturely character, is nothing but a believing, religious activity; and that this work of faith and religion can proceed in divergent directions, either toward or away from God. In the lives of different Christians, these two directions and movements are, due to the effects of sin, variously interwoven in a remarkable way.

It is clear that when the Christian accepts this situation as the only valid premise for life and thought (and in the light of God's Word there is no other possibility for living as a Christian), then such a person will increasingly feel like a stranger in the area of science and scholarship. At the same time, the spiritual burden that has to be shouldered will get heavier as biblically ordered insight deepens and Christian conviction increases. This is because the scientific enterprise, and therefore the university itself, represents a spiritual power. Regardless of whether or not they are conscious of it, scientists, scholars and universities are bearers of spiritual "values". And that is true also of those universities which claim to be "neutral" or "public".

That means that Christians who teach or study at a so-called neutral institution occupy a difficult and vulnerable position. For in such a situation there is a real danger that they accommodate their position to a thought-pattern not inspired by the

Christian religion. That threat will decrease with the extent to which they realise the fallacy of the neutrality-premise and the modern community ideology. They will become increasingly conscious that they occupy a frequently lonely outpost where it takes all their strength to remain standing. But if they know that God Himself has called them and if they realise that they cannot fulfill this calling in their own but only in His strength, they will be able to make perhaps a modest, but nevertheless significant, contribution toward the work of redemption, not only in the hearts of those among whom they work but in the entire scientific enterprise.

3. Moulding a Christian Community.

In the light of all this, it comes as no surprise that Christians, and specifically Christian students who studied at liberal and/or materialistic universities which flew a neutral flag, began to seek each other out. They did that, in the first place, in order to give each other spiritual support in an extremely difficult situation, and also often with the express intention of proclaiming the gospel to the unbelieving world. By way of illustration, we refer to the rise of the Cambridge and Oxford Inter-Collegiate Christian Union, out of which arose first the Student Christian Movement (SCM) in England and later (after both Unions had withdrawn themselves from the SCM for principial reasons) the Inter-Varsity Fellowship of Evangelical Unions (at present the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship).²

Another case in point is the Reformed Student Movement in the Netherlands. These organisations arose from the conviction that entrance to the university must not imply a farewell to the Christian faith. And though the British movement had primarily a missionary focus, whereas the Dutch was of a more defensive orientation, both movements stood for the unabridged gospel.

² See Tissington Tatlow, *The Story of the Student Christian Movement*, (London: SCM Press, 1933). In Australia the evangelical movement is represented by the 'Evangelical Union', or 'Christian Union', or 'Christian Fellowship' functioning on or in relation to campus, and organised nationally by the Australian Fellowship of Evangelical Students. For the Australian situation see Howard Guinness, *Journey Among Students*, (Sydney: Anglican Information Office, undated), and John and Moyra Prince, *Out of the Tower*, (Sydney: Australian Fellowship of Evangelical Students/ANZEA, 1987). For North America see *The Growth of a Work of God*, (Evanston, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1978).

It is remarkable that this development among students failed to produce its complement among professors. The reason, very likely, is that in the predominantly liberal universities of that day very few confessedly Evangelical professors and lecturers had earned a place. Perhaps it is also related to the fact that teachers (Christians not excluded) generally have a strong individualistic bent. That raises the question whether we should be content with that situation. Christianity is not the business merely of individuals but primarily of a community. The Christian faith is the concern not merely of saved units but of a redeemed community, the people of God called to make manifest the marvelous acts of God not only within the believing community but also across the wide fields of the world. Together we are called to carry out that mandate.

This individualism, in addition, contradicts the very nature of scientific work. For in scientific enterprise we are confronted not with hermetically sealed and isolated "specialisms", but rather with a principally indissoluble coherence of relationships, objects, structures and aspects. The validity of this statement is apparent especially to the Christian. The Christian student knows of the integrality and coherence of the creation.

For that reason the Christian may not and cannot consent to an unconnected division of the sciences into isolated specialisms. It is precisely the Christian's belief in the unity and the coherence of the creation (which in Christ awaits its consummation) which motivates the Christian to ask the ultimate questions in their particular field or discipline. Even if the Christian's primary interest lies in a special research-area, s/he must still account for its context, not least in the course of communicating and co-operating with scientists investigating other areas.

The very nature of the scientific enterprise requires an idea of the totality of all that exists - and that idea is nothing but the theoretical articulation of the thinker's leading religious motifs. The articulation of such motifs is not just the business of theologians or philosophers, but the mutual concern of all scholars. They need each

other in this work. And that surely implies that, for the purpose of joint reflection on the problems of our time and for the purpose of discovering a Biblical perspective on these problems, Christian thinkers - though dispersed - should seek each other's help. We often remain unconscious of the extent to which our vision in the various scientific disciplines has been darkened by sin. But the liberating power of God's Word can make itself manifest in our persistent and prayerful works. However, occasional meetings now and then will not suffice. More lasting arrangements are necessary.

4. Christian Study and Research Centres.

In this connection we are thinking, in the first place, of the establishment of study and research centres in specific countries and continents. Even if they are staffed with only a modest but highly qualified research team consisting of three to five scholars representing distinct faculties these centres can perform a significant work.

The activities which can be performed by such centres include, among others: (1) the regular preparation and organisation of shorter or longer study-conferences at which Christian scholars are given the opportunity for an intensive exchange of opinions about the relation between problems in their own special field of study and the Biblical foundation of their lives - and therefore also the relation of their problems to those in other areas; (2) the stimulation and support of Christian groups for scripturally directed study among both faculty and students at universities and colleges; (3) the preparation and maintenance of bibliographies of Christian scholarly publications, so that those who desire these may be as fully informed as is possible; and (4) the stimulation of, and, eventually, independent publication of literature in which the attempt is made to further the development of biblically directed scholarship.

We are convinced that such study and research centres do not have to be elusive 'Utopias', but can be real possibilities for Christian endeavour. Evangelical Christianity all too frequently assumes a re-active, defensive attitude in the area of

science, and has been content with an apologetic stance. Much more than this has to be done. It must - armed with the sword of the Spirit - become intellectually proactive.

The position of Christianity in tomorrow's world will, to a significant degree, depend on the answer it gives to the question of whether it understands its task in this area. The envisioned study and research centres could be a significant medium to sow the seed of God's Word in the world of learning. An eminently Christian task awaits us here.

These centres should also gradually become locations able to accommodate scholars for occasional periods of concentrated study. For that purpose they must be furnished with adequate libraries containing especially publications which deal specifically with problems of faith and scientific knowledge. For other material they should have the opportunity to resort to a general academic library. Especially for this reason, too, it seems advisable to establish these centres near an existing university. That is desirable also for the promotion of the highest possible degree of direct contact with the academic world, for these centres should remain in constant contact in order to keep abreast of developments. Only in that way will they find it possible to pursue a well-directed policy.

5. Christian Universities.

The questions remains, however, whether we should be content with the establishment of such centres, and whether we should not proceed in the direction of establishing Christian universities. I am aware that by asking this question I am touching an issue on which there exists no agreement among Christians. All the more reason to bring up the issue for explicit discussion!

In the preceding paragraphs we posited the thesis that the various disciplines are religiously qualified and possess an inner coherence. That means that the religious choice of position has consequences not for one or more specific disciplines only but

for the whole scientific enterprise. The religious starting-point both unites and directs - a fact attested to by the existence of distinct schools of thought. The world of science is a unity. It presses us by its very nature toward a systematic unfolding of (created) reality and the development of a conception of the whole. This is an obvious normativity, a law which one cannot ignore except at the cost of becoming an emaciated specialist or a superficial eclectic who lacks a truly scientific, scholarly vision.

It is clear that here the Christian community faces a task which it can perform meaningfully only within the framework of a Christian university. Lacking Christian universities as concentration centres for study and education, Christians will not be able to wield real influence and power - in the spiritual, Biblical sense of that word - in the area of scholarship. Nor will they be able to make a really distinctive contribution toward the development of the various disciplines. And because scientific knowledge continues to gain in importance in human society, the result will be that a science without Christian foundations will become an increasingly greater threat. Here we are confronted with a pastoral problem of the first order - one that should not be underrated, for it is a problem that confronts professors as well as students.

With this we have also pointed to the deepest motive which led to the foundation of the Free University of Amsterdam in 1880. In the famous address, *Souvereiniteit In Eigen Kring*, with which Abraham Kuyper opened this institution, he posited the inner unity of science and scholarship with great lucidity.³ Moreover, he stressed in a pointed manner that this unity can only come to full expression when it is elaborated and applied out of a communally accepted basic principle. For without such a principle the ways will quickly run in diverse directions. In this he detected the

³ Abraham Kuyper, *Souvereiniteit in Eigen Kring*, Inaugural address delivered on the occasion of the opening of the Free University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands, 20 October, 1880, (Amsterdam: Kruyt, 1880). The publishers plan to make available an English version of this address in its 'Papers on Christian Higher Education' series.

See also Frank Vanden Berg, *Abraham Kuyper: A Biography*, (St. Catherines: Paideia Press, 1978), 91-114.

foremost line of division between those who desire to acknowledge the Lordship of Christ also in the scientific enterprise - in accordance with Christ's own claim that all power has been given to Him - and those who, for whatever reason, do not desire this. In this respect Kuyper rejected the possibility of a lasting synthesis.

6. High Standards.

In order to reach its goal, a Christian university should conform to high standards. Those standards must be of a religious-ethical as well as a religious-scientific nature.

By religious-ethical standards we mean, in this connection, that those who affiliate with a Christian university must realise that together they are called by God to perform a task in the world of scientific research, study, and education; and that they should perform their task in communion, ministering to each other, to the Christian community at large, and to the world. In the exercise of that active, communal ministry, it should also become evident what it means to be Christ's disciples.

By religious-scientific standards we mean that at a Christian university we must not be content with a devotional framework in the form of worship services, Bible study groups, and so on - however necessary these may be. The real point of a Christian university is, specifically, *the inner renewal of the theoretical enterprise itself*, through the power of the Word of God, through that which the Holy Scriptures teach us about the continuing struggle between light and darkness, grace and sin, the *civitas dei* and the *civitas terrena*, about the consummation of the age in the Son of God, about the new heaven and the new earth in which God will be all in all. Driven by these fundamental Biblical truths, it must make a scientific contribution to the knowledge of the facts, relationships and structures which confront us in God's creation on every side, and to our knowledge of the laws and principles which hold for these structures and relationships - including the Word-revelation in its creaturely aspects (the Word became flesh!). And all this is to be done for the greater glory of God. This is no minor challenge. Nevertheless, we may not set our aim lower than

this. And we must remember that we shall only be able to carry out a task of such proportions fruitfully when we realise that God has indeed called us. Otherwise we may not even begin, or, if attempted anyway, our work will soon begin to erode under the process of secularisation.

We need but remind ourselves of institutions like Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Leyden, and Geneva, which began as Christian institutions but which became estranged from the Christian religion. They function as warning signals to those institutions in the world which can still be characterised as Christian.⁴

7. Potential Dangers.

The road which a Christian university must travel is neither easy nor without danger. It is not impossible, for example, that a Christian university turns into a "Christian bulwark" behind which one attempts to ward off every kind of non-Christian influence and behind which we constantly busy ourselves with the cultivation of a narrow, sectarian way of life - instead of an institution at which we try, in obedience to the Word of God, to be academically engaged in training young scholars for the task which awaits them in the world. A Christian university may never become an end in itself. The university must, on the contrary, give itself in ministry to the world - also to those institutions which still look on science and philosophy as mostly an autonomous affair. In this way, one of the most significant services rendered by a Christian university to the so-called neutral or state universities will be to produce scholars of principle, thoroughly trained and highly qualified, with a thorough awareness of the problems of the contemporary world, who should be eminently eligible for positions in these institutions. It is important, also, in this connection, that those who are affiliated with the Christian university participate constantly in the scientific discussion in the larger context of the academic world. Every false and unnecessary isolation must be avoided. Such isolation is only the neglect of the real dynamics of the Word of God, for that Word compels us to carry out our task in the world.

⁴ In this context, and with reference to Australia, see Edward D. Fackerell, 'The Concept of a Christian

Another, hardly imaginary, danger is that a Christian university becomes so susceptible to the influence of the surrounding world that it begins to drift along with the tides of the day, fails to be sufficiently critical of the forces confronting it, and, as a result, begins gradually to lose its distinctiveness. The need for recognition by institutions professing no particular basis frequently plays, consciously or unconsciously, a significant part in this process.

The desire for recognition is in itself completely legitimate. It should be expressed in a high level of scholarship. But in a Christian university this should never be fulfilled at the expense of the evangelical mandate which it must carry out into the world. As soon as that is done, the demands of science begin to compete with the demands of principle, and then the time of spiritual exile and bondage for the Christian university is at hand. A Christian university, worthy of the name, should, both with an eye to its students and the outside world, manifest clearly that it is *in* but not *of* this world. That holds for its scholarship as well as for its entire behaviour. Paul's admonition in his letter to the Ephesians, "You did not so learn Christ!" directs itself to that work too. Christian scholarship is the attempt to put scientific thought, communally exercised, under the liberating yoke of Christ and His Word, in order that in this work, too, a testimony may be given to His Lordship and His redemptive grace. However brokenly, however imperfectly, such a university may function as one more sign of the faithfulness of God toward the world created by Him. It can be a means to remedy the spiritual schizophrenia so many Christians manifest toward science.

8. A Matter of Faith.

From this point of view the foundation and development of a Christian university is no simple task - but a task entirely of faith. Before it is begun, the cost must be counted in every way. The central point is that dedicated Christians must be found, ready to give themselves to that work and ready to meet that standard. The staff must not be divided with regard to basis and goal. As soon as that happens, the university

begins to lose its power and dynamic. There must be a clear strategy. Experience may teach that at times the strategy must be changed, but that change is the concern of the university as a community, the task of all. Once again, the scientific enterprise is not the business of mere individuals but of joint and mutual dedication to a definite purpose. If that is true for any university, how much more for a Christian university!

We are aware of the fact that the possibilities for the establishment of the most modest Christian university depend, to a large extent, on the potential of the Christians for whose country or continent it is planned. But that is not, in itself, the decisive factor. For much depends also on the attitude taken by Christians to contemporary culture, their opinion about the place occupied by science in culture, and their understanding of the task which awaits them in that culture. For that attitude determines the direction of our work and prayer in this world. We live in a time when also in the so-called Christian West the process of secularisation spreads itself in an alarming and penetrating manner, at times even into the heart of the Christian church. Science plays an important role in this process. This contains a challenge which requires a response from those Christians who desire to live by the Word of God. *Periculum in more! There is danger in delay.* The matter at issue is not only the development of philosophy and science as such but also the spiritual welfare of men and women who are engaged in it.

It is quite likely that each start will be modest. Thus it was whenever Christian universities were founded in the past. Evangelical Christianity should thoughtfully reflect on this matter. This study is intended as a stimulus and contribution to that reflection and to action which can possibly issue from it. For there is a task here, indeed, a calling, which we may not avoid because of Christ, to Whom all power and authority has been given, not only in heaven but also on earth (Matthew 6:10; 28:18).

Jan D. Dengerink.

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