

The mission of the Christian college at the end of the 20th century

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Note: What follows is an edited version of a convocation speech given in September, 1982, at Wheaton College on the occasion of the inauguration of its new president, Richard Chase.

The nineteenth century was the heyday of the founding of colleges across the American Midwest and on toward the far West. Wheaton College, founded in 1860, was part of that great movement. Almost all of those beginnings were Christian. Indeed, almost all of them were what you and I would recognize as either evangelical Christian or conservative confessional. Why that is no longer true today is a fascinating tale in its own right, but what I want to do now is pick up the story at the point where we enter our present century.

Typically, the Christian scholar in nineteenth-century America had a simple and pleasant view of the relation of scholarship to Christian faith. He thought that scholarship, no matter who conducted it, would nicely harmonize with the Christian faith, just so long as it was competent. The two neatly fit together in one harmonious whole. More than that: The nineteenth-century scholar believed that competent scholarship, in at least some of its branches, provided evidences for the truth of Christianity. History and nature, when studied with care, provided arguments for the existence of a wise Creator and of a benevolent Redeemer.

Then two mighty hammer blows made that comfortable edifice totter and sway. Darwin proposed his theory of evolution, a theory which not only accounted for design without postulating a designer, but which seemed to many incompatible with the Christian gospel. Christians responded initially according to the established pattern. They tried to show that Darwinism was incompetent science. Or rather, they ridiculed it, with hundreds and thousands of jokes and cartoons; for they could not really show that Darwinism was incompetent, and in their hearts they knew that. By all the standards of the age, the theory of evolution was thoroughly competent science. Yet it could not be smoothly integrated with the gospel as the nineteenth-century Christian understood it.

That was trouble enough. But at the same time there arose in Germany a development which if anything was even more threatening. I refer to the higher criticism of the Bible. For eighteen hundred years

Christians had regarded the Bible as the very speech of God. It was a word addressed to us from outside our existence. But then in the nineteenth century a body of scholars—once again, *competent* scholars—said, “Not so.” The Bible is not a message from One who dwells beyond the horizon of our existence. Rather, it is the finest flowering of the human religious spirit. These scholars buttressed this vision by rubbing the noses of their readers and listeners in the humanity of the Bible. The Bible, they said, was not composed in bursts of ecstatic inspiration, but was stitched together from previously existing documents and traditions. It was even possible to discern the stitches. Furthermore, these stitched-together documents and traditions did not fully harmonize. And in any case, they contained a number of claims which by the results of science were to be judged false, and by the enlightened moral conscience as offensive.

Design without a designer; revelation without a revealer. We need no great feat of imagination to surmise what happened when these two developments burst onto the scene. American evangelical Christianity went into a tailspin. It became deeply defensive. In many places it became anti-intellectual. And where it did not become anti-intellectual, its scholarship became strange, eccentric, out-of-touch. It could not cope confidently with the threats facing it. So evangelicals acted as frightened people generally act. The famous Scopes trial seemed to be the final blow before the darkness of bewildered consciousness descended. William Jennings Bryan, that great gladiator and three-time candidate for the presidency of the United States, entered the trial to show what fools these evolutionists be. But he was cleverly maneuvered into the witness stand and there subjected by Clarence Darrow to merciless, withering, scornful cross-examination. In the end it was he who was made to appear the fool. Five days after the trial ended he died of exhaustion, and with his death the darkness descended.

Obviously, evangelical colleges such as Wheaton did not go out of existence. They did in effect go underground. Probably they didn't at the time have the resources to do much else. They emphasized personal

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piety. They stressed evangelism, especially foreign. And from the cultural heritage of the past and the cultural accomplishments of the present they carefully picked and chose, lifting out what was judged safe, and placing the rest under locks. They sought to quarantine and inoculate their students against the cultural developments of the day. And toward society they acted ambivalently. They thought and talked of America as a Christian nation; yet they made clear that a vast number of roles in American society were unfit for their students. Education in the evangelical Christian colleges became culturally and socially disembodied.

Let me call this pattern of response, prominent in the American evangelical colleges from the beginning of the century up through the Second World War, Stage I. I daresay that some of you are wondering whether in describing this stage I have not drawn a caricature. At many points it sounds strange and unfamiliar to you, not to mention unattractive. Of course, there were always teachers in the colleges who did not fit this pattern, teachers who opposed it, teachers who argued against it. But these were lonely figures. The fact that you and I now find this pattern of response odd and unfamiliar indicates that evangelical colleges today are in a different stage, call it Stage II.

Stage II is now in full flower. The flower opened sometime after World War II, though exactly when is not altogether clear. Let me explain what I see as the essence of this new stage.

Think for a moment of the works of high culture which humankind has produced down through the ages: works of natural science, of philosophy, of theology, of music, of painting, of poetry, of architecture. The image that immediately comes to my mind here is that of a mighty stream, ever widening as it approaches us, flowing down from the distant past. Now I suggest that the best way to think of liberal arts education is to think of it as education designed to enable the student to interact fruitfully with that stream of high culture. A liberal arts education enables you to appropriate some of that poetry and some of that music for your own; it enables you to understand some of that philosophy; it enables you to attain some of the comprehension offered by that science. And in my view we shouldn't argue that the worth of this lies in making us better persons; often it doesn't. Neither should we argue that it is indispensable for becoming critical thinkers; there are other ways. Nor need we argue that it is indispensable for certain professions, though it is. All that need be said is that science and art enrich our lives. When science opens our eyes to the astonishing pattern of creation and when music moves us to the depths of our being, then we experience some of the shalom that God intends for us his human creatures.

Art and theory are a gift of God in fulfilment of our humanity. A life devoid of the knowledge that theorizing brings us and of the images that art sets before us is a poor and paltry thing, short of what God meant our lives to be.

Now what characterizes Stage II in the history of American evangelical colleges is that, with defensiveness largely overcome, these colleges have resolutely insisted on introducing their students to the full breadth of that stream of high culture. Quarantines have been lifted. But beyond this, they have also resolutely insisted that our appropriation of that stream be integrated with the Christian faith. Faith and culture are to be united. Indeed, "integration" has become so much a password that I am sometimes tempted to propose a ten-year moratorium on its use in any Christian college. But more yet: Not only has there been an insistence on the integration of faith and learning; people have come to see that scholarship itself is conducted out of differing perspectives and that the integration of faith and learning which beckons us does not consist in tying together two things independently acquired but consists of practicing scholarship in Christian perspective. No longer, then, is the guiding image the nineteenth-century image of simply adding the Christian faith to competent scholarship. Rather, competent scholarship is seen to be a pluralistic enterprise. A piece of scholarship may well be competent and yet yield results incompatible with the Christian gospel, for it may be the articulation of a perspective alien to Christianity. Accordingly, the calling of the Christian scholar is to practice scholarship in Christian perspective and to penetrate to the roots of that scholarship with which she finds herself in disagreement—along the way appropriating whatever she finds of use.

In short, what I find fascinating is that a new consensus has emerged as to the nature of scholarship and of its relation to the Christian faith. That consensus is profoundly different from the consensus of our nineteenth-century forebears and has enabled us to come to grips in a nondefensive way with high culture. We are able now to see that scholarship is not merely competent or incompetent. In scholarship, as in art, we are confronted with the articulation of divergent religious perspectives. At the same time, we have learned to acknowledge that even from scholarship with which we disagree, and even from art whose animating vision is foreign to us, we may receive benefit and delight.

One of the remarkable and gratifying benefits of this new stage in the history of the evangelical colleges is that alliances have been forged between evangelical colleges such as yours and conservative confessional colleges such as mine. The conservative confessional colleges always felt uncomfortable with the defensiveness of Stage I, and with its near exclusive emphasis

The Christian college cannot burrow into culture . . .

on personal piety and evangelism. By contrast, in Stage II we have found that we could work together, with the result that almost seventy evangelical and confessional colleges are now united in the Coalition of Christian Colleges.

Furthermore, within the last ten or fifteen years Christian psychologists and historians and literary scholars and philosophers and visual artists have all founded their own organizations and established their own journals. The members of these organizations are not dubious scholars on the fringe. Among them are some of the most prominent names in their fields. In my own area of philosophy, three of the last four presidents of the Western division of the American Philosophical Association are members of the Society of Christian Philosophers. All of this would have been inconceivable before the Second World War. To my mind, it is clear evidence that we are now in a different stage. The world of Christian academia that you as students have entered today is a world profoundly different from that of the first forty or fifty years of this century.

Is this the final stage? Is it now the mission of the Christian college simply to do more of the same and to do it better—with more penetration, more imagination, more creativity, more courage, more self-confidence, more fidelity to the gospel of Jesus Christ? Or could it be that we are called to enter a third stage? Could it be that our mission at this point in our history and at this point in the history of the world requires us to take a large step and enter the uncertain future of a Stage III?

I think that it does. And on this important occasion in your history I want to place the challenge before you. What I have to say may well prove unsettling to some. Decisively to enter Stage III would be to move beyond patterns of thought and action with which we have grown familiar, without knowing exactly what we are moving toward. I cannot tell you in detail what a college in Stage III would look like; I don't have a blueprint up here on the podium. But I am persuaded that the issues I wish now to raise must become matters of serious and sustained discussion among us all.

One preliminary remark. I know that your entrance here at Wheaton into Stage II did not mean the repudiation of those emphases of Stage I on personal piety and evangelism. Rather, those emphases were incorporated into a larger, richer, more comprehensive whole. So too, our entrance into Stage III must not be

a repudiation of our concern with the cultural heritage of mankind. Rather, that concern must be incorporated into a yet richer perspective. Let us not discard what we have gained, but carry it along forward.

In describing Stage II, I have spoken repetitively of *culture*. But now reflect for a moment on the fact that culture is something different from *society*. Culture, as I have meant it, consists of *works* of culture. Society, by contrast, consists of *persons* who interact in various ways. From that interaction arise social roles, social practices, and social institutions. And though here in college you may learn how to appropriate for yourself various offerings of the stream of culture, when you leave here you cannot simply appropriate culture. You have to fill certain social roles, engage with your fellows in certain social practices, participate with them in certain social institutions. My question now is this: Can we in the Christian colleges allow that just to take care of itself? Can we fundamentally ignore society and concentrate on culture? Can we assume that you will somehow find out for yourself how to live as a Christian in society and that you will act on what you have learned?

Well, if all was as it should be with society, then of course the college could teach you how to appropriate the stream of culture, perhaps supplement that with some instruction relevant to some vocation, and then send you forth, confident that whatever else you needed to know would be taught you by the ambient society itself. But all is not well with society. Have you heard of the Palestinians whose hearts are aching to the point of bursting for a place they can call home, and whose heart is now filled with rage at the American-made planes and bombs that have rained destruction upon them? Have you heard of the Jews who are fearful to the point of paranoia that another holocaust awaits them somewhere on the horizon? Have you heard of the more than ten million Americans who lack the fundamental dignity of work, and of the nearly thirty million people in the Western world who lack that dignity? Have you heard Charles Colson and others calling our attention to the utterly degrading conditions of life in many of our prisons? Have you heard of the sickly self-indulgence and the unbounded toleration which now characterize our Western society? Have you heard of the 17,000 nuclear warheads our country has poised to be fired, and have you heard that some judge even this to be woefully inadequate? Have you also heard of the nuclear warheads poised to be fired at you and at me by the Soviet Union? Have you heard of the Poles struggling bravely to throw off the oppressive shackles

... while neglecting
the suffering produced by society.

of communism? Have you seen the shuddering squalor of our inner cities in which bearers of the image of God are made to live? Have you seen and smelled the smog of Los Angeles? Have you heard that the Parthenon in Athens has decayed more in the last twenty-five years than in the preceding twenty-five hundred years?

I tell you nothing new. The social world in which we find ourselves is desperately in need of re-formation. Our ears cannot be stopped, our eyes cannot be closed. Particularly not your ears and eyes, nor mine. For you and I represent the body of Jesus Christ. We are his feet and hands in the world, his heart, his mind, his voice, his eyes, his ears. We are the bearers of his word of comfort, heralds of the coming of his kingdom of peace.

But we are more than heralds. We are agents. We do the work of him who in turn did the work of his Father. We heal and we liberate. We struggle for shalom in all dimensions of human existence, realizing indeed that our efforts will not bring about the kingdom in its fullness, but knowing also that the kingdom will not come about without our efforts. We cannot let society go its own way, when the way it is going is so far from the Way of the Lord.

But what does this have to do with the Christian college? A great deal. The most fundamental thing to say about the Christian college is that it is an arm of the body of Christ in the world. It is of and by and for the church. It exists to equip members of the people of God for their life *as* members of that people—a people which exists not for its own sake but for the sake of all humanity and thereby to the glory of God. So I am led by iron chains of argument to conclude that the Christian college cannot neglect the suffering of humanity. True, it cannot neglect the suffering produced by alienation from God, and it cannot neglect the suffering produced by the natural world. But also it cannot neglect the suffering produced by the social world. It cannot burrow into culture while neglecting society.

You protest that the liberal arts college has no competence in this area. Is that true? To act responsibly in reforming society, one must know the structure and dynamics of that society. Can the Christian college not provide such knowledge? To act responsibly in reforming society, one must know the effects of various strategies. Can the Christian college not provide such knowledge?

So once again: We are challenged to enter a new stage. If the focus of Stage I was on piety and evangelism, and the focus of Stage II on culture, without

losing the concern for piety and evangelism, then the focus of this new stage, without losing the contribution of those earlier stages, must be on society—on *the Christian in society*.

I have already said that I cannot foresee in detail what a Christian college which has entered fully into Stage III would look like. But I do have a dim picture in my mind's eye, and from that picture I think I can discern two or three characteristics.

(1) Such a college will, I believe, be much more international in its concerns and consciousness than any of our colleges is at present. We do indeed live today in what McLuhan called a global village. You and I are citizens of the United States. But American influence spreads throughout the world—sometimes for good, sometimes for ill; and in turn, our society here is profoundly influenced by what happens across the globe. It is for that reason that the Christian college which enters Stage III will have to become internationalized. That it is an arm of the church is here a tremendous advantage. The church, and the church alone, is "one o'er all the earth."

(2) Such a college will, moreover, have to explore new ways of packaging the learning it presents to students. When our concern is simply to appropriate the stream of culture, then the relevant packages are available and familiar: physics, literary criticism, music theory, economics, etc. But when our concern is to equip our students to reform society, then we walk in uncharted terrain. Perhaps we shall need programs in peace and war, nationalism, poverty, urban ugliness, ecology, crime and punishment.

(3) Finally, such a college will have to be far more concerned than ever before with building bridges from theory to practice. Throwing some abstract political science at the student along with some abstract economics and sociology will not do the trick. The goal is not just to understand the world but to change it. The goal is not just to impart to the student a Christian world-and-life-view—it is to equip and motivate students for a Christian way of being and acting in the world. And there is not a shred of evidence that simply putting abstract theory in front of them will alter their actions.

Such talk tends to make us nervous. Should the Christian college really aim at shaping the social actions of its students? Is that not indoctrination? Should we not rather put the various options in front of the student and let him or her choose?

But we have never acted this way in the past. Did

Wheaton in Stage I merely put in front of its students various personal life-styles and then say, "You choose"? Does it do so now? Does Wheaton in Stage II put some poetry in front of its students and say, "See if this is to your taste?" Does it not *cultivate* appreciation? Does it not *cultivate* understanding? Does it not *cultivate* authentic piety? Can it now responsibly do anything else than cultivate peace, cultivate the dignity of the prisoner, cultivate the care of the earthy, cultivate a home for Palestinians?

Internationalization, new ways of packaging, fresh strategies for bridging theory and practice—those are some of the consequences I foresee if we do indeed enter Stage III. Beyond that, I don't know. This I do know, that the church of Jesus Christ is called to be an agent of shalom in the world and that we in the Christian colleges must no longer be content with evasive answers when we are asked why we act so hesitantly in promoting the social dimension of that mission.

We evangelicals are finally beginning to get it through our heads that we in America do not live in a Christian society. We live in a mixed, pluralistic society in which the body of those committed to Jesus Christ is just one of the components in the pluralism. But at the same time—thank the Lord—we are beginning to get it through our heads that it is unworthy and disobedient for the church in this mixed society to cower in timid silence. It is beginning to recognize that it has a liberating word to speak to that society and a healing hand to extend to it. It may not withhold that word and that hand. We are ready for Stage III.

One final matter. I have said that the task of the Christian college must never be isolated from the mission of the church. It often strikes me, however, that evangelicals don't much care for the church. They like to think of *Christians*, not of the church. And if they do think of the church, they tend to think of it as born yesterday,

and of Christians around the world as waiting for what we in the Western church have to teach them. That those Christians might have something to teach us is never thought. But the church was not born yesterday. Neither was it born in the Wesleyan revival. It wasn't even born in the Reformation. Trace back your ancestors in Christ and you will find yourself going back beyond Wesley, back beyond the Reformation, to the Catholic church of Western Europe. And then you will find that you must go still further back, back to where the western Catholic church had not parted from the Eastern Orthodox church, back to the apostles themselves. Those long lines stretching to the very origins of the church constitute your spiritual ancestors and mine. We receive what they have handed on to us. And perhaps they have more to hand on to us than we have been willing to receive. It may just be that not all wisdom and fidelity is ours. The Orthodox Church, as no other, has kept alive the practice of prayer and contemplation. The Catholic Church has never let go of the role of the sacraments in Christian experience. The Reformers, with startling force, taught all Christendom to listen for the Word of God. And yes, the evangelical tradition has also made its contribution. As no other, it has perceived the importance of repentance and second birth.

The anxiety and defensiveness of the evangelical has begun to quiet down. And as it does, I think I witness the stirrings in him of an awareness that the church is vastly larger than he ever dreamed, richer than he ever imagined, more often faithful to the teaching of the apostles than he ever admitted. Perhaps, then, Stage III will prove to be not only the stage of the Christian in society. Perhaps it will prove to be the stage of the Christian in the *church* in society.

So let us move on into the uncertainties of that most certain future of working for the coming of our Lord's kingdom of justice and peace and love.

Mending the fence

Reagan and the evangelicals

Richard V. Pierard

"There is sin and evil in the world, and we are enjoined by Scripture and the Lord Jesus to oppose it with all our might. Our Nation, too, has a legacy of evil with

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which it must deal." So spoke Ronald Reagan to 1,200 members of the National Association of Evangelicals at their annual convention in Orlando, Florida, this past March, an appearance much commented on in the press.

In a thirty-minute speech interrupted by applause some twenty-eight times, the chief executive appealed