

Lincoln Christian University: Theological Premises and Philosophical Musings

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“What kind of education will prepare students for life, leadership, and loyalty to Jesus Christ?”

Theological Premises

LCU should be grounded in creation:

A Christian university is fundamentally grounded in and predicated upon the truth that God is the creator and sustainer of all that is. The innate value of creation is summed up in God’s own judgment: “And God saw that it was very good” (Gen. 1:10, 21, 25, and 31). Creation is both a given and a gift from the creator God. As His creatures, we have the unique position of responding to the creator in obedience, submission, covenantal fulfillment, and ultimately a co-creative stewardship of all reality. Since we cannot create a new reality, ours is the task of living in the wonders of God’s creation, translating it into a meaningful and fruitful existence with the parameters of His covenantal love, and engaging redemptive activity that is honorable to Him and productive for the human condition. In a sense, our every human activity is done in response to and relationship with Him and His creation. The beauty and complexity of creation is ours to behold by enjoying it, engaging it, and exploring it. Thus, a Christian university is called to embrace all that is His, avoiding at all costs the tendency to label the physical and spiritual as dual components of reality. This unified sense of reality is indeed what is uniquely ours in the arena of Christian higher education.

LCU should be expressive of God’s image:

The Christian vision of a university not only validates the creatorship of God but the creative capacity of man. With all that is implied in our being made in the image of God comes the privilege of expressing what this means. It is best defined in Genesis 1:26-31 by the context of fulfilling the “cultural mandate.” Our responsibility of filling and managing creation surely speaks to the intent of the imago dei. The capacity for human reproduction and earth keeping reflects countless capacities and responsibilities. By doing so, the wise and prudent development of tools, relationships, and understanding will sustain and advance the high calling as “earth keepers.” A Christian university is a place where the fullest expression of God’s image can be developed. Since all of creation is ours to pursue, then God’s image is welcomed into every dimension of that reality. Here students are encouraged to recognize their God ordained value and abilities and boldly find every conceivable means of expressing that through their giftedness and sense of calling.

LCU should be cognizant of the Fall:

In a perfect world, university thinking would jettison human existence into the glories of greater and greater perfection. Here contemplation and education would be free of the human fray realizing every notion of wonder and cultural attainment. However, our condition is marred by a fallen nature. Education in this less than perfect environment makes room for humility, failure, experimentation, ambiguous processes, research, and reflection. Thus the role of God's revelation serves as a fundamental "self corrective." We do see "as in a mirror dimly" and thereby confined to a limitedness, that both intrigues and humbles us. The "cloistering effect" created by campus culture can be hazardous both to students and faculty alike. Therefore, every effort must be made to realize our intentions for excellence this side of perfection, fallibility this side of infallibility, and humility this side of pride. A community in Christian higher education carries with it a sense of transparency in all matters, both administrative and academic. By doing so, we model to our students, our constituency, and the world at large, the priority of mission and the admission of sinfulness.

LCU should not be an ivory tower:

The insular nature of what occurs through a college or university setting is both invigorating and stifling. The invigoration of an academic setting provides all the glamour of research, writing, reflecting, and relating in a controlled setting. This benefit, to which all would agree, can be a seedbed for contempt and hubris. At times this may endanger the development of students. A Babel-like experience should be avoided at all costs. Having collective wisdom, concentrated intellect can lead to a false sense of greatness that neither serves the creator nor engages meaningfully the world surrounding the university. While a university can be self-serving, it must strive to do otherwise. The ivory tower images in higher education are an inadequate expression of the Christian vision. Here the exchange of ideas from abroad, and the experiences on a global scale serve to inform and transform the university. By doing so, the university is spared a short-sighted provincialism and afforded a global effectiveness. While Lincoln, Illinois, is not at the crossroads of the globe geographically, it certainly is and should be philosophically and operationally. In fact, bearing the name "university" enables that vision all the more.

LCU should be redemptive in its vision:

A Christian university believes that "the best is yet to come." Our every endeavor is sustained upon the renewing power of Jesus Christ and His Spirit. This "new creation" is initiated through the personal transformation of students, faculty, and staff throughout the campus. The discipleship dimension is primary, culminating in an eventual expression of vocation and calling. Through spiritual formation, appropriate curriculum, and careful mentoring, students engage a redemptive vision for their own lives in particular and the kingdom of God in general.

The Christian university understands that knowledge of all kinds and wisdom of the greatest degree are but the foundation for the mission of God. It is the vision of reconciling all things in heaven and earth to Jesus Christ and by doing so, adding to the reordering of God's world. The instrument of this reordering is the church, a relationship powerfully stated this way.

The church needs to place on the university's agenda the claim that the faith of its members can be sustained only when its people are trained to negotiate the economics, politics, science, sociology, and philosophy of the biblical faith in a world that has strongly competing views on such matters. The request of the church is for the Christian university to participate in shaping people who are literate and fluent in a language that is able to disclose what God is doing in this world. The church needs an educated people to present a more complexified view of human nature – of violence, sin, peace, and love – than most people have, given their somewhat distorted view of things learned from popular culture. The church needs an educated people to present alternative answers to questions of justice, international relations, and power; to present alternative models for how people can live together in ways that liberate and heal brokenness. The church needs an educated people to promote structures that foster the art of welcoming the stranger in a culture of protectionism; to promote that truth is not a possession but a gift in an age of capitalism; to promote that forgiveness is a viable strategy of social reconciliation in a culture of fear.

The claim that the church sets the agenda for the Christian university should, of course, not be taken to mean that only the immediate issues of the church are debated and clarified in the university. It should be understood in the large sense that the church mandates the university to educate its youth to be the kinds of people who as Jews and Greeks, men and women, slave and free can live together in peace. In this sense, the university is a place where the walls of hostility can be broken down and the art of reconciliation can heal and restore. The university should address issues of poverty, wealth, power and impotence, forgiveness, sin, failure, revenge, war, structures, history, truth, praise, and gift – all traditional and current themes within any university and in the larger public. Ecclesiology precedes pedagogy because pedagogy must ask what teaching is for. The answer is given in terms of training people to see and read the world as the arena of God's redemptive activities and of training people to become particular kinds of people capable of bearing witness to such activities. (Huebner, 303-304)

LCU should be a servant first:

With sufficient warning that "knowledge puffs up," a Christian university must do its best to quell any sense of hubris. The ambition to prepare leaders on behalf of Christ's church is absolutely necessary but must be exercised with great caution. Our every task and our every accomplishment can and should be measured by a humble subservience to Jesus Christ. Careless and caustic demeanor in the name of learning brings dishonor to the one who we serve. Collegiality and mutual submission are principles that will sustain the desired unity lacking in so many university campuses. The Christian university has opportunity today to express the best of scholarship, rich classroom competency, and a servitude that speaks louder

than academic credentials themselves. When servanthood and scholarship are wed, the church is enabled and the culture is ennobled.

These theological observations are intended to be discussion starters in looking at the kind of Christian university we aspire to be. To complement these theological reflections we now turn to some broader philosophical musings.

Philosophical Musings:

Structuring a Christian University:

While there are extensive conversations regarding the structure of Christian higher education, there are two that summarize our discussion. Duane Litfin describes two dominant or common models for encompassing the goal of Christian education. They are the umbrella model and the systematic model. He describes their distinction in the following way:

Umbrella Model. Institutions provide a Christian “umbrella” or canopy under which a variety of choices can thrive. (Litfin, 14). Here, genuine diversity exists, ranging from secularity to competing religious perspectives. As long as mission is supported, differences are tolerated. Litfin concludes: this model “. . . seeks to have a variety of perspectives without sacrificing its sponsoring perspective. Unlike many secular settings that strike a neutral pose, but are in fact hostile to genuine Christian thought, umbrella institutions create an environment congenial to Christian thinking, but without expecting it of everyone.” (Litfin, 14-17).

Systematic Model. This institution reflects the effort of systematizing Christian thinking throughout. This is reflected in the curriculum, faculty selection, and the fostering of Christian ideas. Anthony Diekema states: “. . . by logical extension (the) mission must permeate everything we do, giving internal consistency to teaching, scholarship, student life, administration, community relations . . . everything. . . . a truly Christian college is distinguished by a mission statement that articulates a Christian worldview and implements it throughout the curriculum and by faculty where scholarship is anchored in the same worldview.” (Diekema, 57).

It is my opinion and proposal that the systematic model is both descriptive and prescriptive for the vision of Lincoln Christian University.

Integrating the Curriculum of a Christian University:

This notion, while complex and at times dismissed as impossible is deemed important in our ongoing process. It is therefore, incumbent for us to survey the steps necessary in evaluating the need for and possibility of integration. The first step is certainly the one of philosophical possibility. In a pluralistic world, the need for and recognition of a coherent or integrative

vision of reality is viewed with suspicion. To this David Dockery has surmised. “A Christian university has always as its premise the knowledge that all truth is one and all ways to truth are one because the author and the end of truth is One.” (Dockery, 75). There are of course countless voices that share this proposition, certainly one subject to debate, nonetheless compelling and necessary for our proposal. Given our theological premises, this is a recommended starting point.

Since our perspective that God’s reality is unified and coherent and it is centered on the person of Christ, we then “preserve all apprehension of truth to follow in line.” (Litfin, 94). This then becomes the journey of education. Navigating the complexity of reality, acknowledging our subjectivity, and embracing our theological framework, we must avoid naïve realism. Arthur Holmes advocates a “sophisticated realism, a chastened realism, and a unified realism” or what I prefer, “a critical realism.” By doing so, we conduct our endeavors with a healthy sense of reality, a self-awareness of fallibility, with an on-going need “to constantly experience and reexamine our understanding.” (Bock, 22.)

Given the commonality of a pluralistic worldview, a university is hard pressed to be what “uni-versity” implies. Historically the university’s model for unity was decidedly a liberal arts education. With the demise of liberal arts on university campuses, the potential for the unification of education and the search for the meaning of life have all but disappeared. Time does not permit a full exploration of this phenomenon. I would however recommend what some scholars refer to as one of the finest contributions in higher education today: *Education’s End, Why our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life* by Anthony Kronman. He chronicles the tragic demise of the humanities in American higher education concluding that the question of the meaning of life is irrelevant. It, in his mind, has been left to the church in America. Education is weaker for it, and the church is incapable of responding completely to it. Therefore, there is a need for Christian universities to provide an appropriate response.

This certainly warrants further discussion but for the sake of time I will leave you with this thought. Our goal is to maintain a healthy and necessary tension. David Naugle provides a simple and clear view here: “. . . we can avoid the excesses of both modernist dogmatism and postmodern skepticism and terminate in a kind of critical realism which recognized both objectivist and subjectivist factors in the knowing process.” (Naugle, *Worldview*, 106.) The contemporary university has, in fact, abandoned the notion of truth, and ever more so a universe that lacks coherency. A Christian university is an advocate of both and will best find the means of doing so through the vision of integration. A curriculum comprised of interdisciplinary studies, worldview thinking, and a theological core will help insure this objective.

A Theologically Competent Faculty in a Christian University:

Trustees, administrators, and constituent communities of a Christian university are absolutely dependent upon a competent faculty. Competency in pedagogy is an assumption but

competency in theological expertise is not. The necessity for such is succinctly stated by Duane Litfin on behalf of Wheaton: “It is not enough merely to be a Christian and to know one’s discipline; genuine Christian thinking requires depth on both sides of the ledger. The Christian scholar needs to be theologically literate.” (Litfin, 72.)

This level of expertise cannot and should not be assumed. It should be provided through an ongoing process of faculty development. For the Christian academician this underscores the need to ask the question Alister McGrath considers “the first and the most fundamental of all questions: What is truth?” (McGrath, 191.) Answering that question is the stuff of academic freedom that enables faculty at Christian universities to explore without fear the reaches of human understanding and the rigors of theological reflection. This is precisely what is meant in Mark Noll’s definitive statement “we are between the demands of free academic inquiry and of committed theological loyalty.” (Noll, 36.)

The history of Christendom is largely a by-product of how Christians have responded to this ongoing tension between Jerusalem and Athens, the church and the academy. It is with humility and fortitude that we serve the church through our academic mission.

Conclusion

Lincoln Christian University is not and will not be the first institution to wrestle with the theological and philosophical issues of Christian higher education. There is much to learn from history and a great need to speak to these extraordinary times.

It is my hope and prayer that countless conversations regarding this issue will enable us to be faithful to our Lord Jesus Christ, and the truth of His Kingdom. And so let us pursue with a pure heart and keen mind what Arthur Holmes so aptly describes as “doxological learning.” In doing so, our every endeavor gives praise and honor and glory to God. (Holmes, 2). To which I say, amen and amen.

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