

1 WHY A CHRISTIAN COLLEGE?

The French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre describes the human predicament in the words, "Existence precedes essence." What he intends is that human existence comes devoid of any built-in value, any prior direction or inherent meaning. The naked fact that I am awakens me to the realization that if life is to mean anything at all, then I must myself create its meaning. I am free to make life what I will, dreadfully free, but I can also shrink from this responsibility and lapse into the empty anonymity of "bad faith."

In many basic regards I cannot agree with Sartre, for God has vested life with rich meaning and purpose, and the very fact of my existence is inherently valuable at least to God. I am not free to make of life whatever I will, nor to affirm values wholly alien to the created order. Yet Sartre has highlighted the predicament of the modern mind at a loss to know what life is all about.

Some analogy exists, I suggest, between that existential predicament and the predicament of today's college student. The fact is that too many young people attend college or university, and their parents encourage them, without any gripping sense of what college is all about beyond tentative vocational goals or questionable social aspirations. Many attend Christian colleges for reasons that are so secondary, if not altogether inadequate, that they will end up frustrated unless they can find other meaning to their education, a meaning that is large enough to carry the weight of all that college involves.

The fact also is that public opinion saddles the Christian college with inadequate reasons for existing, reasons the college cannot accept if it is to conceive and implement its task effectively and as a whole. Faulty expectations generate public relations problems and these add a needless burden to the problems of higher education today.

We face a generation of students for whom much in life has lost its meaning, for whom morality has lost its moorings, for whom education has lost its attraction. Add to this the economic crunch on small colleges and it becomes overwhelmingly obvious that we need to get down to basics, to the underlying and central reason for existing at all. Otherwise the student and the college may both lapse in "bad faith" into the faceless anonymity of people and places without distinctive meaning and become mere statistics in the educational almanac.

AVOIDING PITFALLS

A frequent idea people have of the Christian college has been captured in the label "defender of the faith."¹ Though defending the faith was certainly an apostolic responsibility, it is hard to extend it to all of the educational task, all of art and science or all of campus life. Yet a defensive mentality is still common among pastors and parents; many suppose that the Christian college exists to protect young people against sin and heresy in other institutions. The idea therefore is not so much to educate as to indoctrinate, to provide a safe environment plus all the answers to all the problems posed by all the critics of orthodoxy and virtue.

This is an idea, I say—more a caricature than a reality. The trouble with it is that there often are no ready-made answers, new problems arise constantly, and the critics are perplexingly creative. The student who is simply conditioned to

1. This designation was used in the Danforth Foundation study by M. M. Pattillo and D. M. MacKenzie, *Church-Sponsored Higher Education in the United States* (American Council on Education, 1966). The label and description were publicly rejected by a group of Christian colleges.

respond in certain ways to certain stimuli is at a loss when he confronts novel situations, as he will in a changing society undergoing a knowledge explosion. He needs a disciplined understanding of his heritage plus creativity, logical rigor and self-critical honesty, far more than he needs prepackaged sets of questions and answers. The mistake in cloistering young people to keep them from sin and heresy, as evangelicals—of all people—should realize, is that these things come ultimately not from the environment but out of the heart. And while every parent feels protective toward her youngsters, overprotectiveness can stifle faith and hope and love, and trigger opposite excesses of thought and conduct.

Is the idea of a Christian college, then, simply to offer a good education plus biblical studies in an atmosphere of piety? These are desirable ingredients, but are they the essence of the idea? After all, through religious adjuncts near a secular campus, students could be offered biblical studies and support for personal piety while they were getting a good education, without all the money and manpower and facilities and work involved in maintaining a Christian college.

Nor is the idea of a Christian liberal arts college to train people for church-related vocations, desirable as this may be as a by-product and central as it may be elsewhere in the educational work of the church. Training, in contrast to education, develops skills and techniques for handling given materials and facts and situations. Education admittedly includes some training in the earlier stages of learning. But the educated person shows independence and creativity of mind to fashion new skills and techniques, new patterns of thought. She has acquired research ability, the power to gather, sift, and manipulate new facts and materials, and to handle altogether novel situations. The educated Christian exercises critical judgment and manifests the ability to interpret and to evaluate information, particularly in the light of the Christian revelation. In a word, if she is to act creatively and to speak with cogency and clarity to the minds of her fellows, the educated Christian must be at home in the world of ideas and people. Christians, unfortunately, often talk to themselves. We

think in ruts, and express ourselves in a familiar kind of family jargon. Unless we understand the thought- and value-patterns of our day, as well as those of biblical revelation and the Christian community, and unless we speak fluently the language of our contemporaries, we tragically limit our effectiveness.

Another inadequate reason is the social and extracurricular benefits of the Christian college. It is true that in a small institution one has closer relations with both students and faculty, and that in a Christian institution one expects to find Christian friends and even a life partner. It is also true that one stands a better chance of becoming a campus leader or working in student publications or proving athletic prowess. But these are only fringe benefits; however much they contribute to the student's personal development, they are secondary to education as such. Many of them can be matched outside of college, for it does not take four years out of the work force at a cost of tens of thousands of dollars plus lost earnings in order to play soccer, to chair a committee, to find a mate, to put on a rocking-chair marathon, or even to give Christian witness by serving with love in the local old folks home. These things can be done without ever going to college.

College is for education, the liberal arts college for a liberal education, and the Christian college for a Christian education. These are the basics to which we must get back. To sell college primarily on some other basis is to operate under false pretenses; and to start into college for some other reason is to ask for frustrations. We must therefore come to see education as a Christian calling, we must explore what "liberal education" means and how it is affected by the Christian's task.

Then why a Christian college? Its distinctive should be an education that cultivates the creative and active integration of faith and learning, of faith and culture. This is its unique task in higher education today. While the reality is often more like an *interaction* of faith and learning, a dialog, than a completely ideal integration, it must under no circumstance become a *disjunction* between piety and scholarship,

faith and reason, religion and science, Christianity and the arts, theology and philosophy, or whatever the differing points of reference may be. The Christian college will not settle for a militant polemic against secular learning and science and culture, as if there were a great gulf fixed between the secular and the sacred. All truth is God's truth, no matter where it is found, and we can thank him for it all.

Integration also transcends awkward conjunctions of faith and learning in some unholy alliance rather than a fruitful union. What we need is not Christians who are also scholars but Christian scholars, not Christianity alongside education but Christian education. This precludes taking critical potshots at variant interpretations of material without working out a more satisfactory explanation. It shuns tacked-on moralizing and applications, stale and superficial approaches that fail to penetrate the basic intellectual issues. It requires a thorough analysis of methods and materials and concepts and theoretical structures, a lively and rigorous interpenetration of liberal learning with the content and commitment of Christian faith. The Christian college has a constructive task, far more than a defensive one.

THE EDUCATIONAL DISTINCTIVE

The task is distinctive for two reasons. In the first place it is distinct from other Christian involvement in higher education. The Christian college is of course only one way of making the Christian presence felt academically. In the secular university, Christian students and professors walk a different road, primarily that of witnessing in a non-Christian environment. But important as this is—in fact the Christian college should encourage some of its finest students to become Christian scholars in secular academia—the primary impact is still a *conjunction* of Christian witness with secular education rather than the integration of faith and learning into an education that is itself Christian. The Christian college, moreover, is primarily an undergraduate teaching institution, not primarily a graduate school, nor a collection of professional schools nor

a research and public service institution as the modern university has become. Its task is far more specific.

The Bible institute and Bible college offer another way. They came into being to provide biblical instruction for Christian laymen so as to make their witness and their church work more effective, and they have become undergraduate training schools for Christian workers. They have obvious value, but their function seems to be more conjunctive than integrative. To enlarge a person's biblical and theological knowledge and to train him for Christian service is not the same thing as helping him to work in the arts and sciences and thereby to understand all of life from a Christian perspective.

Programs of biblical studies have recently been established by evangelicals on or near a few secular campuses in order to instruct the Christian and to engage the non-Christian in dialog. These programs range from a Bible-institute type of instruction for undergraduates to graduate-level religious studies offered by scholars who might also teach in the university. But again the impact is primarily conjunctive and only occasionally integrative. Apart from the occasional Christian scholar teaching in a secular university in a nontheological discipline, the integration of faith and learning remains the distinctive task of the Christian liberal arts college.

Some Christian institutions give themselves primarily or largely to professional or vocational training. The seminary, for instance, devotes itself to the professional preparation of college graduates for various types of church-related ministry, and other Christian institutions might focus primarily on vocational preparation in such areas as business education and engineering. We shall comment later about the relation of vocational training to liberal education, but one obvious difference is already apparent: the vocational is more concerned to provide the knowledge and skills needed for a particular set of tasks, while the latter is concerned with other qualities of a liberally educated person and, in a Christian college, with the development of Christian perspectives in all areas of life and thought. What commends the liberal arts college is that

the Christian's vocation is larger by far than any specific ministry or vocation one may enter: it reaches into everything a person is and can be or do.

THE RELIGIOUS DISTINCTIVE

The Christian college is distinctive, in the second place, because we live in a secular society that compartmentalizes religion and treats it as peripheral or even irrelevant to large areas of life and thought. Public education and large segments of private education are consequently thoroughly secular. The Hebrew-Christian worldview that once gave meaning and value to all of Western life and thought has disintegrated. The medieval university was governed by a unifying religious perspective but education today is rootless, or at best governed by pragmatism and the heterogeneity of viewpoints that makes ours both a secular and a pluralistic society. The result is a multiversity not a university, an institution without a unifying worldview and so without unifying educational goals.²

The Christian college refuses to compartmentalize religion. It retains a unifying Christian worldview and brings it to bear in understanding and participating in the various arts and sciences, as well as in nonacademic aspects of campus life. Its oldest precedent is the medieval university, where the life and thought of the entire community were penetrated and informed by theological studies.

American higher education was the child of religion, and the history both of church denominations and of the westward expansion can be traced through the history of America's colleges and universities. Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and Columbia—to name but a few—began this way, and the list of those established prior to the Civil War includes forty-nine founded by Presbyterians, thirty-four by Methodists, twenty-

2. Clark Kerr, former president of the University of California, uses the term "multiversity" to indicate that it serves a variety of uses in contemporary society, a largely pragmatic notion. See his *The Uses of the University* (Harvard University Press, 1963).

five by Baptists, and twenty-one by Congregationalists.³ Some of this number have become multiversities or lost their evangelical distinctives, but others are still known among evangelicals today as distinctively Christian colleges, among them Geneva College, Taylor University, and Wheaton. Yet all of them began with an eye to the propagation of religion and morality as well as for the sake of education and culture, and they at least conjoined scholarship with evangelical fervor and a quest for social righteousness, to whatever extent the two were effectively integrated. Over the years, various reasons for existence have been given, sometimes protective or apologetic, sometimes pietist or missionary, sometimes vocational. Yet underlying it all was the basic conviction that Christian perspectives can generate a worldview large enough to give meaning to all the disciplines and delights of life and to the whole of a liberal education.

Some observers have doubted whether the Christian college has any distinctive contribution to make at all, whether it is not too committed to offer a truly liberal education, whether it can survive the skyrocketing cost of private education and the competition of rapidly multiplying state universities and community colleges, or whether the church might not do better to put its resources of people and money behind some other enterprise on the secular campus.

I do not think for a moment that the situation is as bleak as some of these prophets declare, either in terms of our present contribution, or in terms of educational philosophy, or in terms of the economic prospects. I think rather that the Christian college has not sufficiently articulated its educational philosophy, and has not sold the evangelical public or perhaps even its own students and teachers on what it is trying to do. A few exceptions to this generalization have come from denominational schools with well-established views on the relation of Christianity to culture and a well-established scholarly

3. D. G. Tewksbury, *The Founding of American Colleges and Universities Before the Civil War* (Columbia University, 1932; Archon Books, 1965), chap. II.

heritage.⁴ But by and large we have not dreamed large enough dreams or are confused about the values of liberal education or have forgotten the redemptive impact of faith on culture. In any case we are in integrity compelled to face basic questions. Why should the Christian college exist? Why choose to attend a Christian college? What meaning has Christian liberal arts education today?

4. In particular see the Calvin College study, *Christian Liberal Arts Education* (Calvin College, 1970), and in the St. Olaf College study *Integration in the Christian Liberal Arts College* (St. Olaf College Press, 1956), although neither of these is addressed to the general public or to the student.