

THE ROLE OF THE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY
IN THE CHURCH OF THE NAZARENE

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The world changed with 9-11. It did more to us than we immediately knew. It introduced us to a destructive complexity that our powers had no way to confront. We knew how to mass our forces against an enemy that appeared on the battlefield under an opposing flag. Now we face enemies who have no country, no flag, no turf. They fight ideologically, defend no territory, and exist only by making enemies. They destroy without regard. They leave behind rubble with no intent to erect a better society to prove their point. They are willing to hold life hostage as a means of getting what they want. They live by instilling fear. The tactics of terrorists have become the tactics of movements.

In many ways, we are living in the days of Solomon. Remember the woman whose baby died. She took the child of another woman and appeared before the wise king to settle the opposing claims of motherhood. The thief woman was willing to let the baby be divided with a sword rather than surrender her rights to it. Getting what she wanted was more important than the life of the child. The woman who wanted the baby to live was its true mother, but she was placed in an unthinkable situation where she had to surrender the child to declare her love for it. The other woman was a terrorist. At any price, she wanted what she wanted, without regard for the life inherent in the child. Only the wisdom of Solomon brought sanity to the moment and gave the child to the one who was its true mother.

The discourse occurring in most denominations these days is taken from the playbook of terrorists and thieving mothers. Winning debates is more important than the creation of peaceful communities, more valued than the life of the children. We've seen the Baptists fight over women preachers, inerrancy, and CRT (critical race theory). We've seen the Episcopalians divide over ordination qualifications regarding sexual orientation. We've seen Catholics divide over birth control, the role of women in the church, and clerical abuse. We've seen the Methodists divide over sexual ethics of same-sex attracted members.

I would not begin to suggest that these are not important matters. These issues need generous discourse. But what we've seen is the rendering of the body, the creation of enemies where brothers and sisters once embraced, and the eruption of uncivil discourse in the church. Conversations are like the childhood game "Pin the Tail on the Donkey." Conversation ends as soon as the donkey is appropriately pinned. Discourse goes only deep enough to attach labels.

¹ This article was originally published in 2007 with Edwin Robinson, then President of MidAmerica Nazarene University. All facts, figures, and titles were accurate to the best of our knowledge at that time but may have since changed and the article updated. See also *Didache: Faithful Teaching* 12:2 (Winter 2013) for an additional, previous, version (accessed online 8/17/2021) <https://didache.nazarene.org/index.php/volume-12-2/882-didache-v12n2-05-role-christian-university-boone/file>

How we debate our differences says as much about us as where we end up. The body of Christ is looking more and more like news talk shows that pit the extreme right against the extreme left for ratings. We are more like comedians with an edge, launching our arrogant one-liners, punch lines, and character smears. Discussions are nothing more than drive-by shootings. Technology permits such a discussion by way of blogs, and other social media. The one thing missing in this digital war is bodies. As people who embrace the doctrine of the incarnation, it seems that the church should at least have bodied conversations. Cyber-smear never looks into the eyes of another person and beholds a creature of God. With terrorism or false mothers, bodies just don't matter that much.

Where in the world can one find a discussion on important issues that is two-way, listening as well as speaking, civil as well as honest, informed as well as opinionated, willing to suspend judgment while studying the complexity of the issue? Where in the world are Christians delving into difficulty with eyes and ears open to the fact that complex issues are not easily resolved? Where is civil discourse happening? Where are people disagreeing with one another without becoming sworn enemies? Where is the pursuit of increased knowledge being balanced by deepening wisdom? Where are the trained thinkers of the church gathered for the purpose of tending to the thought life of its youth?

I would suggest that the Christian university is the site of such an undertaking. Yet it is under attack for the very act of investigation and civil discussion. Groups who have reached their final conclusion regarding creation, political party, nationalism, the environment, social justice, economic theory, racism, and so many other important issues, make their demands that the university side with their position or suffer the consequences. They have no concern that the baby live or that a wise community of thinking Christians be formed, only that their opinion be championed.

I can hear the push back. Yes, sometimes professors are not faithful to the church in their teaching. They need to be confronted. Yes, sometimes the ranges of opinions expressed by students are not in keeping with the thought of the church. This is how students process life as they opine in social media on the way to who they will become. Yes, the university exists in service to the church. Its leaders must constantly account for the mission. Yes, there are stories of colleges gone wrong across the American religious landscape. This must be the ongoing concern of the Board of Trustees.

But given all this, our Christian universities have a vital role to play that no one else is positioned to play. We engage our youth at the time of life when they are self-differentiating from their parents. They are in that common stage of defining themselves as their own persons, not a clone of their parents. It is common for them to question, to resist, to think freely. This is how one owns their own thoughts and faith. The Christian university provides an environment rich with wise friends – in dorms, classrooms, libraries, counseling centers, gyms, ball fields, coffee chats, and cafeterias. The people who work in our colleges are believers. They care about their fields of study, and about the students who engage with them.

So, what does it look like for Wesleyan-holiness people to live out our calling in Christian higher education? Who are we?

We are the theological heirs of a man named John Wesley. He experienced God as holy love expelling sin thereby enabling people to be restored in the likeness of Jesus. This profound experience caused him to saddle a horse and ride into the world. He travelled with his Bible open on his lap, reading as he went. He believed the God of love he experienced had gone into the world ahead of him and was calling him to follow. This God was not hiding in doctrines or waiting behind closed church doors to be discovered and debated. This God was en route to redeem his creation from sin. Wesley was given the eyes of God to see children in factories needing education, the poor needing food and shelter, the debtors in prisons needing money, the sick needing good medical care. Wesley saw the broken world through the eyes of a loving God. He was not afraid of the world or its ideas, even when it rejected and attacked his God. He was a curious life-long learner. He wrote about health, money, estate gifts, economic theory, personal grooming, literature, politics, science, and the arts. He made friends among those who had differing Christian theologies, offering his hand of fellowship in a catholic spirit. Wesley did not think God in need of human defense but did think humans in need of Godly sanctity. His life of loving service caused people to be interested in his doctrine of sanctification. They wanted to know about the God who could do this kind of thing in a human heart and prompt such a life of service.

This heritage means many things for Wesleyan-holiness universities. But mostly it means that we educate from a Wesleyan perspective. I would suggest that it looks like this.

1. We believe God engages us across the entire liberal arts curriculum. We speak of God as quickly in a science or history class as in a religion class. God's revelation is not limited to the university chapel. We believe there is a Biblical way to understand political power, economic theory, human diversity, justice, public school education, science, the human body, and the use of technology.
2. We prepare students for life in the middle of the world. We do not shield, protect, or coddle them in an unreal spiritual bubble. Rather, we declare that God has gone into the world ahead of us and is calling us to follow. True discipleship can only be fulfilled by following God into that needy world. Saints aren't made behind closed church doors or defensive doctrinal positions. We believe it is possible to live in the world without being of the world. It is important to us that our students are interested in the world rather than afraid of it. Like Wesley, they travel with a Bible on their lap, interpreting the world through the revelation of God.
3. We place high emphasis on the development of the whole person. We are made to love God with body, mind, soul, and strength. The practices of spiritual formation are important to us – prayer, fasting, scripture study, hospitality, listening to God in silence, communion, and worship. These habits form us as Christians. Our students study, laugh, play, and eat – and sometimes sleep. They are involved in clubs, classes, intramural athletics, dramatic productions, and campus social life. Our dorm life is an extension of the academic classroom, because there we learn respect for property, problem solving,

relational integrity, sharing, and all the other values that help us live peacefully in a community.

4. We also believe that holiness is highly relational. The mentoring relationship between university employees and students is essential to a Wesleyan education. We learn from each other. Years later, it is not so much content as godly influence that is the abiding gift of a Christian university.
5. We learn in an academic atmosphere that is hospitable and charitable to those who do not believe as we do. Wesley called it a catholic spirit. A profession of Christian faith is not required for one to attend our colleges. Having our ideas challenged is part of the educational process. We are not afraid of asking the hard questions or debating the difficult issues.

This is who we are. I know of no better place for a college generation to work through their doubts and questions than a campus filled with Godly mentors. Higher education remains a denominational focus from the earliest days of the Church of the Nazarene.

Our predecessors started Bible schools and institutes to educate clergy and laity in theology and practical, professional arts. Many of these schools matured into comprehensive colleges and universities that offer a core curriculum of Christian liberal arts and various professional majors. Over the last century, Nazarene colleges, universities, Bible colleges, and graduate seminaries have become a mainstay of Nazarene identity all over the world. But what about our future? Considering rising costs, increasing competition, and some decreasing denominational loyalties, how can we secure this vibrant partnership between Nazarene education and the church? Many other schools that began with a spiritual passion eventually drifted morally.

What will keep Nazarene colleges and universities from succumbing to secularization? Nazarene higher education has five distinct qualities that will continue to strengthen our schools while other institutions fight to exist:

Nazarene higher education is church-based, not church-related.

Nazarene schools are connected to the denomination by ownership, loyalty, financial support, and regional structure. This purposeful partnership is upheld through policy *and* practice. District and national assemblies elect and nominate trustees at Nazarene schools. Nazarene congregations demonstrate their support for educational institutions through prayer, financial resources, and a consistent stream of students. Nazarene schools understand their essential mission is to serve the church by: providing church leadership, teaching critical thinking on theological and social issues, producing educated professionals whose consecration includes sacred acts of worship *and* routines of the workplace, and giving Nazarenes opportunities to experience loyal friendships and life-stories that span generations. These realities have been integral to Nazarene schools from their beginnings.

Nazarene higher education is committed to pursuing truth across the curriculum.

Nazarene schools have always embraced the broad foundations of the liberal arts grounded in biblical truth and theological clarity. This is the best preparation for a life-long calling of servant leadership in any profession. In good Wesleyan-holiness fashion, we don't hesitate to explore academic disciplines through a theological lens. We are not afraid to wrestle with life's big questions of purpose, values, morality, justice, righteousness, and truth. We gratefully acknowledge the full panorama of God's revelation in science, mathematics, history, literature, sociology, psychology, and philosophy, as well as in theology and biblical studies. While we recognize our limitations, we know the Holy Spirit will guide us into all truth.

Nazarene higher education is a community of wisdom.

Marketable skill development, credentialed programs, and objective outcomes are the staples of today's educational focus. To meet public demands for trained professionals, most degree programs require more specific courses and leave less room for intellectual curiosity or philosophical inquiry. However, Nazarene higher education has always helped students shape their lives as well as make their living. This soul-shaping formation is rooted in the biblical description of wisdom as capturing a vision of God. Wisdom is more than super-sized common sense or appropriately applied knowledge. It is taking a mature look at life through a divine lens. Nazarene higher education seeks this wisdom through shared experiences of faculty, students, and staff in the rhythms of worship, study, service, and play.

Nazarene higher education is catholic in spirit.

While Nazarene colleges and universities embrace our denominational connection, we have never viewed ourselves as sectarian in character or practice. From the earliest years, we have welcomed people from other Christian traditions on our campuses. In recent years, many non-Nazarene students have enrolled in our nontraditional adult education and professional graduate programs. Even our traditional undergraduate populations reflect more denominational diversity. Regardless of their backgrounds, students find Christian hospitality and theological discussion on Nazarene campuses. As Nazarene educators, we enjoy the opportunity to establish the character of community life and the direction of educational conversations. We intend to make an eternal impression for Christ on hearts and minds. Nazarene higher education isn't just for Nazarenes-it's a gift to the world.

Nazarene higher education is grounded in a Christian holiness perspective.

Our worldview is a window to what is real, true, and worthy. The window is constructed with the authority of Scripture, theological truth, time-honored tradition, reasoned thought, and authentic experience. As the organizing principle for our curricula, this worldview guides every teacher's integration of faith and learning. It is a way of living that has shaped students' minds and hearts to hear God's call, discover God's purposes, and embrace God's mission in the world. Does Nazarene higher education have a future? Absolutely! Our future is as bright as our past. We remain true to our heritage, our theology, and our purpose to integrate learning with service to God, the church, and the world.