

THE ROLE OF THE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY  
IN THE CHURCH OF THE NAZARENE  
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The world has changed. 9-11 did more to us than we know. It introduced us to a complexity that our powers had no way to confront. Used to fighting wars with enemies who appeared on the battlefield under an opposing flag, we knew how to mass our forces against the enemy and gather sufficient armies to win. 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.

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 render one another over women preachers and inerrancy debates, and destroy their colleges and seminaries with litmus tests. We've seen the Episcopalians divide over the ordination of practicing homosexuals. We've seen Catholics divide over birth control, the role of women in the church, and clerical abuse.

I would not begin to suggest that these are not important matters that ultimately define religious movements. 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". They end as soon as the donkey is appropriately pinned. Discourse goes only deep enough to attach labels.

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 like Steven Colbert with his arrogant one-liners, or Letterman with his punch lines, or Limbaugh with his smears. Discussions are nothing more than drive-by shootings. Technology permits such a discussion by way of blogs, websites, and fan pages. The one thing missing is bodies. Being people who embrace the doctrine of the incarnation, God becoming flesh, it seems that the church should at least have bodied conversations. Cyber-smear never looks in 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, informed, willing to suspend judgment while studying the complexity of the issue? Where in the world is Christian faith 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 increasing knowledge being balanced by growing wisdom? Where is the trained thinking 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 conclusion regarding creation, political party, the environment, social justice, economic theory, 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 are not in keeping with the thought of the church. This is how one comes to know what they think and how one is confronted with a different way of thinking. 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, jam sessions, 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.

This is not how the Wesleyan-holiness people have acted. Our story and our theology expects better of us.

We are the theological heirs of a man named John Wesley. He experienced God as holy love expelling sin thereby enabling him 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 help. His life of loving service caused people to be interested in his doctrine of entire 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 the perspective of a Wesleyan worldview.

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, 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. What better place to work through doubt and question than a campus filled with Godly mentors?